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## L. Sobolev

## THE GREEN LIGHT

A story

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE MOSCOW





# L. S O B O L E V THE GREEN LIGHT

A STORY

# TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN BY RALPH PARKER AND VALENTINA SCOTT

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To O. I .- my faithful friend

#### CHAPTER ONE

CHARGED with a special task behind the lines, sloop 0944 was on its way to a part of the coast held by the enemy.

It was early spring on the Caucasian coast, but out at sea this could not be felt. The warmth of the sun, now dipping to the horizon, had gone out of the air and the head wind was quite chilly. The sea heaved slowly with the swell of the previous day's storm; with all three engines running, the sloop easily outstripped the long rollers. The 'w, lazy furrow cut by the stem flowed evenly along the sides of the ship, hardly strong enough to rock it in its rapid course. Astern, the screws sucked it in, kneaded and tossed it up into a high wall of foaming surf, and it seemed that it was

in these boiling, upturned waters and nowhere else that the low, powerful roar which followed the speeding sloop originated.

No sound is so pleasant to a captain's ear as the confident voice of a man-of-war. The fine, strong roar of the three engines clearly distinguishable through the chug of the exhaust gases conveys the comforting knowledge that the sloop is in perfect trim and that only a touch at the helm is needed to steer clear of any mine which may suddenly poke its round black head above the surface, or to dodge the bomb streaking from under the wing of a diving plane. That is why Lieutenant Alexei Reshetnikov felt in excellent spirits.

His right side propped against a breast-rail so that he could keep an eye both on the compass and on the sea ahead, he stood motionless. His bulk took up a full third of the bridge for it was a tiny place and he was wrapped from head to toe in an enormous sheepskin coat. The frantic revolutions of the screws set the whole bridge vibrating; the resilient deck drummed, the rail stanchions trembled, the binnacle shook, the taut signal halyards smacked against a canvas windscreen, the wooden yard on the short mast sang out with a hollow ring. But the Lieutenant's motionless sheepskin towered like some symbol of calm and inflexible pertinacity, just the qualities required on the bridge. Beside Reshetnikov, completely covering the small wheel with two huge sleeves, stood a second motionless sheepskin concealing the helmsman in its depths; a third rigid monument towered by the fo'c's'le. The heavy spray breaking from time to time off the high plume of foam below the stem came showering on to this monument with a rattling noise but, failing to penetrate the smooth, light-hued leather, ran de y it in swift dark rivulets. No better proof was needed to show that the nickname "night watchmen" given by the other captains to Reshetnikov's crew was the result of sheer envy and regret that they had not thought of acquiring these great sheepskin coats and turning their own

sailors into "one-man mobile deck-houses," as Reshetnikov called them.

The Lieutenant's sheepskin moved, and out of the matted wool collar appeared a weather-beaten, surprisingly young face with a snub nose. His alert grey eyes narrowed, stole a quick, searching glance at the sky and the horizon, and then no less quickly and searchingly scanned the sloop from stem to stern, a process which made the entire sheepskin turn with incongruous alacrity.

From up there on the bridge the whole sloop could be seen—a mere cockle-shell of timber and metal, lost in the deserted wastes of the enormous sea. Yet so precise and well-proportioned were the ship's lines, her masts, deckhouse, bridge and guns that you did not notice how small she was.

The deck planks, washed by countless salt waves, gleamed a faint moist yellow; the hatchways leading to the engineroom and the wardroom were well-defined rectangles of darkness. The machine-guns glistened with grease and burnished steel. With their barrels raised pugnaciously to the sky they looked like strange musical instruments. Beyond them, firmly fixed to the deck on its dove-grey, coneshaped base, stood the aft gun, its brass and nickel instruments glittering. It looked sleek, elegant. At one side was a metal container, its lid significantly open to reveal a golden honeycomb of brass shell-cases. Up against the rail stanchions were ranged the smooth, dark cylinders of small depth charges. The sloop was not carrying its usual complement of heavy ones that day; the place where they usually stood in the stern was occupied by a six-oar boat, lying at an awkward angle. And from the fact that an ordinary ship's boat was too long to fit across the deck space of the sloop it became evident that it was also no ear matter for a heavily-clad man to squeeze through the hatchways; that the gun was more like a pistol stuck on a post; that to cross the width of the deck was only a matter of five or six paces, and that this fearsome man-of-war with

its deck mountings and machine-guns and depth charges was after all nothing but a small sloop, a cunningly-devised shell around a powerful heart of three strong engines.

The boat was an alien body. It had been taken along to enable SK 0944 to fulfil the mission on which she was speed-

ing to the enemy-held coast.

A week before, in a secluded little cove along that coast, a similar boat had been lost. Sloop 0874 had put it ashore with a reconnaissance party. Senior Lieutenant Somov waited until dawn for it to return but had to leave without knowing what had happened to it and to the two sailors who were supposed to bring it back from the coast after the landing operation.

Surprises of all sorts were to be expected during these night landings. Sometimes, at a place where similar clandestine operations had been made successfully before, Germans would appear: they would let the boat get close in to shore and then meet it with hand grenades and machinegun fire; sometimes, however, they would let it put the landing party ashore undisturbed and draw out some way off the coast, and only then would they fall on the scouts, giving the boat no opportunity of coming back for them. At other times, a mine lay in wait among the pebbles and a fiery column would shoot up over the dark water, an ephemeral monument of light before which the sailors in the sloop would remove their caps in silence. But on this occasion sloop 0874 heard no sounds of shooting and saw no explosion. Yet the boat had not returned.

Of course, when the sea was rough boats would founder on the rocks or be cast ashore. Then the sailors would scuttle the boat near the beach and make for the enemy rear with the men they had landed. No signal could be sent to the sloop that would jeopardize the operation. But on the night Senior Lieutenant Somov lost the boat the sea was calm.

In any case, the boat had failed to return to the sloop and there was no news of it or of the men. The mission was of such a nature that the group could not use radio to send news of its fate. Yet to wait for one of them to slip through the lines was out of the question. Besides, a week later circumstances required that another reconnaissance group be sent to the same locality with another important task to do. As there was no clear evidence that the operation was unfeasible, Lieutenant Reshetnikov was ordered to carry it out and, in addition, pick up the landing party again.

Had it been possible, Reshetnikov would have gone ashore in the boat himself: it is so much easier to get to the bottom of things when one is on the spot oneself than by telling others what to do in this or that situation. But, of course, he could not leave the sloop; all that he could do was to entrust the mission to someone he could rely on completely. From those who volunteered to man the boat he chose the boatswain Khazov and the helmsman Artiushin. Artiushin was a man of fabulous strength who could do the work of three at the oars. Besides, he had audacity and imagination. Khazov had once before saved a boat and its men in circumstances no less suspicious. That was before Reshetnikov had received his command. A German ambush had been expected and, prepared for complications, Khazov had brought the boat into the shore stern first so as to be able to make a quick getaway if necessary. Circumstances had proved him right. The boat's stern had just grounded when a hand grenade grazed Khazov's knee and fell hissing at his feet. Without the slightest hesitation he picked it up by its long wooden handle and from where he crouched hurled it over his head back to the beach. There was an explosion, then followed by a hail of hand grenades flung into the undergrowth from the boat. "Push off!" shouted Khazov, and the boat shot back to the sloop as Khazov returned the welcome with sub-machine-gun fire at the undergrowth.

Judging from the wry look on Reshetnikov's fact as he stared at the boat in the stern it still occupied his thoughts. Once before he had taken a large boat like this along with him on an operation and that had given him trouble enough. It could not be towed; it was so bulky and heavy that it

would have held back the sloop for the tow-line might have broken when they were making speed. And so, to the accompaniment of many oaths, they had hoisted the boat on deck and laid it on the only available place, the rack for the depth charges. Even so, it had to lie slantwise and tilted. Launching it at night, under the enemy's very nose, had been a troublesome business: from the high depth-charge racks it slid into the water at too steep an angle. To be more accurate, they had to plunge it into the sea like a spoon into a bowl of borshch. The stern dipped so deep that half an hour's baling was needed afterwards, not a pleasant operation in the immediate vicinity of a coast in enemy hands. That time the sloop was taking supplies to partisans in another, relatively quiet place. But this time. . . .

Pursing his lips, Lieutenant Reshetnikov went on looking at the boat for a while. Then, with a swift movement which was evidently typical of him, he drew a whistle out of his pocket and blew two short blasts, after which he stood as before, with the expression of a man who well knows that he does not have to issue an invitation twice.

And indeed, Khazov appeared promptly at the bridge. He had, probably, been about on deck, for his belted oilskin glistened with spray and the ear-flaps of his fur-lined cap were turned down. The bridge was so low that he did not have to mount it but simply stood on the deck beside Reshetnikov looking up at him questioningly. Ruddy from the wind, with a calm, earnest expression and regular though rather blunt features. Khazov could almost be described as a handsome if not very cordial-looking man. His mind seemed to be overcast by a certain pensiveness, a preoccupation, as if he were always conscious of some inner urge, some pressure of unhappiness which could not yield even to the okes with which Artiushin—the helmsman now buried in the sheepskin, at the wheel—kept the whole ship's company amused. The boatswain's taciturn manner was obviously well-known to Reshetnikov, for, without waiting for the other's formal question, he leaned from the bridge and called through the roar of the engines:

"What d'you say to tying some life-belts to the transom? Five belts, say. D'you think they'd keep her from dipping?"

Khazov turned towards the boat. Reshetnikov was concerned to see him lift his left hand to his cheek. Khazov ran the palm of his hand twice over the clean-shaven skin as he pondered uncertainly, then grasped his chin hard between his fingers and gazed aft with narrowed eyes. Reshetnikov impatiently shifted from foot to foot so that his sheepskin shook. Artiushin smiled over the compass; he was expecting Khazov to say in a sad but firm voice: "It wouldn't work, Comrade Lieutenant,"—the overture to a pithy discussion that would help to speed the dull peaceful watch.

But this did not happen—Khazov removed his hand from his chin and replied:

"Better to put 'em under the keel. They'd keep her higher out of the water that way."

Now it was Reshetnikov who turned to the boat. He, too, screwed up his eyes as he weighed up Khazov's amendment to his plan.

He had reckoned that if the life-belts were tied to the transom, they would keep it afloat while the stem was still resting on the deck. But, of course, it would be simpler and better to fix them under the keel as Khazov suggested.

"Right you are," said Reshetnikov with a nod.

That finished a conversation whose brevity was governed by three reasons at once—the boatswain's character, the roar of the engines and the complete mutual understanding that reigned between the participants in it. Reshetnikov glanced at his watch.

"But you'd better have your supper while everything's quiet and normal," he said. "Watchman, call Listenant Mikheyev to the bridge."

He plunged back into his sheepskin. When, some time later, he stuck his head out for his routine scanning of the horizon, he was astonished to find Khazov still on deck.

"You'd better go and get your supper, Nikita Petrovich," Reshetnikov said to him. "You'll get your fill of freezing in the boat."

"It's a lovely sight," replied Khazov, gazing ahead pensively.

Reshetnikov turned his head. The evening sky, which somehow he had not noticed, spread all the power of its beauty before his eyes.

Over the calmly heaving sea hung the enormous disk of the sun, already slightly flattened. Higher up a cloud spanned the sky, its long, narrow outline dividing the vast expanse into two tightly stretched bands of transparent silk: the lower band rippled like a yellow flag, the upper one dazzled the eye with its pure, fresh, pale blue. Still higher stretched a fanlike tracery of cirrus clouds, light as a daydream; they still flashed with white, but the soft rose-pink reflection of the sunset was already touching their transparent edges from below, prelude to a fantastic play of colours. And when one raised one's eyes from the ominous sunset over the sea to this free expanse of blue, somehow one breathed more freely. The world seemed to become a place where such things as war, grief, death and hate were unknown, and the future held only success and happiness and peace.

At first, Reshetnikov simply looked at the sunset and wondered how he could have missed noticing all that loveliness before. But soon vague, elusive thoughts floated dimly into his mind to the low, powerful roar of the motors which held a note of solemnity like the chords of an organ. He could not describe those thoughts any more than a man can put into words the frail reveries that come before sleep, when visions flash and fade, appearing for a second only to mere winto something else. Turning his face to the wind and yielding to the powerful throb of the engines that came through the rails, he delighted in the headlong course of the vessel, in the sea and the sunset, conscious of an incomprehensible but strong, splendid sensation which grew

until it forced a smile from his lips. What was that sensation? Was it, perhaps, simply happiness?

Happiness?

How could one speak of happiness on that sloop sailing across the empty sea in wartime, a sea where death lurked in every wave, in every cloud? Happiness, when, with each cable's length they sailed, a bomb, a shell, a bullet carried away at least ten human lives in different parts of the world? When with every drop of petrol spurting into the carburettors of the ship's engines a tear of human sorrow was being shed somewhere in the world—on a letter, on the wreckage of a burned home, on a crust of bread to which a hungry child stretched its hand? Can that sacred word, the very sound of which gladdens the heart, still exist in any human tongue? Surely not. There is no happiness in a world on which terrible forces have been unleashed, where war roams and roars, burns and slaughters, smothers, drowns, destroys.

Lieutenant Mikheyev, Reshetnikov's second-in-command, came on to the bridge. Slipping out of his sheepskin and easing his shoulders with pleasure, Reshetnikov handed over the watch. However, on leaving the bridge he did not go below at once but stopped near the engine-room hatchway facing the sunset.

By now the sun touched the water and the glittering path laid by it across the sea was beginning to glow with reddish tints. The great globe Earth, overflowing with sorrow and hatred, was turning round and with it the Black Sea was being drawn out of the rays of the sun. The little slip of a warship, with its engines roaring perseveringly, scurried up the convex world, stubbornly chasing the sun that was now dropping to sleep below the horizon. And the sloop's captain, Lieutenant Alexei Reshetnikov, was now now not conger thinking about happiness or asking himself whether there was room for it in hearts that were held in the callous grip of war. He was simply admiring the sunset and experiencing the deep-felt satisfaction which a man knows only

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when his entire inner world is in complete equilibrium, something which, maybe, can be called happiness. And although the sloop was on a dangerous night operation and Reshetnikov might have been expected to be thinking of nothing else, he watched the incandescent but no longer dazzling disk of the sun with evident curiosity and expectation.

Speeding impatiently on its course over the planet the flattened crimson mass of the sun slid faster and faster into the sea, its outline changing constantly. The disk became an oval, then an enormous floating mountain, then a quivering valley of fire that stood on the rim of the horizon.

Reshetnikov turned round quickly and looked for Khazov. "That's a sight for you," he called hurriedly and turned back to the sunset. "It'll come now, you'll see. It will."

There was a touch of boyishness in his shout, in his impatient gesture, in the way he strained forward in every limb as if he wanted to get a better view of something about to happen. He heard Lieutenant Mikheyev call an order from the bridge. Reshetnikov drew himself up and turned to face the fore-and-aft line—the correct way to stand while the flag is being lowered—but he did not tear his eyes away from the setting sun. Holding his breath, he waited for that moment when the upper rim of the sun finally slides beneath the waves. Then it can happen that there bursts forth a wonderful ray flooding the sky and the sea with a pure green light, more brilliant than the green of grass in springtime, more dazzling than the green of an emerald. This ray appears so rarely that sailors have a legend according to which only a very happy man can succeed in catching that briefest of moments when the famed green light blazes over the sea, as blinding as happiness itself, and, like happiness, never forgotten.

Succently the liquid flame raging in the fiery valley began to trickle with unusual precipitancy from the edges into its centre and in a second everything was drawn together into a single crimson point, as small and sharp as the lamp of a powerful lighthouse. For a second or two it shimmered and shuddered on the very surface of the sea, and then disappeared, showing as a farewell signal a still smaller point of bright, clear green light. It was at that exact moment that Lieutenant Mikheyev ordered the flag to be lowered.

The tiny flag at the stern slid down from the gaff of the short staff. With his hand at the salute Reshetnikov watched it down and, losing all interest in what was happening in the sky, walked to the quarter-deck. Near the starboard machine-gun he found Khazov watching the sunset as pensively as before.

"Never mind, Nikita Petrovich, some time or other we'll see it," Reshetnikov said consolingly, as if it was the boatswain and not he who had just been waiting for the green light so impatiently. "Go and have supper. After all...."

"There's still time, Comrade Lieutenant," Khazov replied.

"I'll fix those life-belts while there's light enough."

Reshetnikov nodded, paused for a while at the aft hatchway while he scanned the horizon once again with a captain's rapid, questing look, and dived below.

The long narrow cloud that hung over the place where the sun had sunk was now deep red. The sun's incandescent flame, shooting out from below the rim of the sea, now struck the sky higher up and the transparent edges of the flimsy cirrus clouds, spread here and there over the pale blue heavens, were also afire. Higher and higher to the zenith the glow spread until it was repulsed by the deep violet twilight that had gathered on the dark side of the sky.

Night had fallen over the Black Sea. Charged with a special task behind the lines, sloop 0944 went on its way to a part of the coast held by the enemy.

#### CHAPTER TWO

Lieutenant Reshetnikov had just entered that happy period of service in the navy which comes only once in the life of a man—when he has his first command.

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It is something as unforgettable as one's first flight, first battle, or first love. However often he comes to stand on other bridges later on, however large the ships he takes on distant voyages, their size—even if it be that of a battleship—can never obscure in his heart the small vessel that gave him for the first time in his life that proud, anxious, joyous self-confidence and that made him realize fully and with all

his being that he is in command of a ship.

This wonderful, incomparable feeling does not come at once. The way to it lies through difficult, often torturous experience. There is the fear of responsibility, the dangerous intoxication of power, the lack of self-assurance, the struggle with false pride and that unbearable longing for someone to turn to for advice and guidance. There are long sleepless nights haunted with anxiety about the ship and with despair about one's own ignorance, nights when one's burning head reels with a jumble of figures and names, shells and cabbages, machinery and human destiny—all that turmoil of incongruities which only a captain can systematize and put in their appointed places in the normal routine of the ship's life. For the captain is the man who is able to create out of people and machines a single organism obedient to his will, at any moment of battle or storm.

Lieutenant Reshetnikov himself was not able to say just when he gained confidence in himself as a captain.

It seemed to him that this particular feeling formed in him imperceptibly, as a combination of thousands of incidents both large and small, of surmise and action, of successes and failures. What had been a torture to accomplish one day became a simple matter of routine the next; a thing that had always required a great deal of concentration of will and thought suddenly happened by itself, automatically, so that the mind was left free for tackling more complicated problem. For instance, one day when he was bringing the ship alongside a jetty he was surprised to notice that he had given his orders to the engine-room and to the helmsman just at the right moment although his mind had been

fully engaged with quite another matter—what quarters to give the landing party on the sloop. And from that day he stopped those meticulous preparations he went in for every time he came alongside and made fast which used to set him searching anxiously, when fully five miles away from the harbour, for that accursed point where he would have to reduce speed in order not to crash into the jetty or find himself left like a fool standing ten metres off from it. Similarly, at first, he used to imagine beforehand what would happen in every sortie, trying to foresee his behaviour in every little detail. And he passed many a sleepless night in this futile and wearisome play of the imagination before he learned to put out to sea after a good night's rest, fully prepared for anything to happen.

Of course, on his earlier trips Lieutenant Reshetnikov probably would not have been admiring the sunset or watching with curiosity for the green light. He would probably have been going over in his mind for the hundredth time every detail he would have to observe to keep the landing secret. He would have been dashing into the chart-house, nagging the boatswain with questions about the hand grenades that might have been forgotten or the boat's compass that might have been left out—in short, showing that needless fussiness which only a greenhorn of a captain mistakes for efficient administration, but which, in fact, only irritates people.

Reshetnikov had felt this calm sense of assurance, the mark of a captain, come to him quite recently—during his fifth or sixth trip. For fully six weeks before that he had lived in a state of constant doubt. He had almost ceased to rejoice in the fact that his passionate longing to command a manof-war had been fulfilled. The fact was, he was not yet twenty-two when SK 0944 was placed under his sovereign command, and he had served little more than a year in the navy. Moreover, for eight months of that time he had bed, in command of an anti-aircraft battery on a cruiser under the supervision of three experienced officers at once—the gunnery officer, the executive officer and the captain of the cruiser—

and that, of course, was hardly the right way to learn to act on his own. True, on the sole occasion when he happened to find himself without their support he had shown himself to be so resolute and brave that the incident turned out the very way to bring him to his present command.

In August the cruiser had gone to shell German defence works. Accompanied by five seamen, Lieutenant Reshetnikov had been put ashore near the fighting area under cover of darkness, had done a bit of excellent spotting from Height 206.5, signalled that he was coming down to rejoin the boat—and had disappeared. The cruiser had waited for a long time and it was only after it had been obliged to put out to sea that it received a message from Reshetnikov: on their way to the boat the spotting party had found itself cut off from the shore by some enemy tommy-gunners and had fought its way back to the Soviet lines. The cruiser replied by ordering Reshetnikov to rejoin his ship as best and as speedily as he could; he had fulfilled this order, turning up a week later in the cruiser with a bandaged hand and improperly dressed—in a pea jacket without any stripes.

Later it became known that Lieutenant Reshetnikov, "being on SK 0519 as a passenger, had in a critical moment of an engagement with an enemy dive-bomber taken over the command of the sloop, its commander Senior Lieutenant Smirnov having been killed, and had brought the sloop back to base with the transport it was escorting, thus dis-

playing personal initiative and gallantry."

It was this incident, described in the somewhat laconic and reserved style customary in citations, that had given Lieutenant Reshetnikov serious food for thought about his career and had made him apply for transfer to a sloop, thus letting down the cruiser and that excellent fire-power that had seen the only worth-while thing in life. The document itself did not, however, reveal what it was that had evoked that persistent desire; many details of the incident were lacking, in particular there was not a word to explain just

why Reshetnikov reported to the cruiser in a pea jacket instead of his own greatcoat.

When SK 0519 originally took on board the landing party. Lieutenant Reshetnikov's coat had been in perfect order save for a few grey stains of some remarkably clinging mud through which he had had to crawl in the retreat from the tommy-gunners, not to mention the two holes in the hem for which the tommy-gunners themselves were responsible. The coat was still in good order when he stood near the charthouse, watching the sloop's guns shelling the planes. Two bombers were attacking the transport the sloop was escorting, a third was after the sloop itself. But when that third plane went into a dive and SK 0519, turning sharply at full speed, dodged the screaming stick of bombs, and when with the hot blast of the explosion came a rattle of bullets against the deck-house followed at once by thick smoke pouring out of the hatchway—then Lieutenant Reshetnikov dashed into the chart-house. And it was there that a serious mishap occurred to his coat.

His first reaction was to jump back on deck. The smoke struck him in the face, blinding him. He crouched to try to see where the fumes were coming from. Then he saw number one, a debonair lieutenant with whom he had been cracking jokes half an hour before. The Lieutenant was trying to crawl to the chart-table. Catching sight of Reshetnikov he shouted hoarsely: "The rockets ... quick...." Reshetnikov reached between the table and the bulkhead, groped under the table and had nearly given up hope of finding the case of rockets when his hand jerked back involuntarily at the touch of hot metal. Then he realized that the rockets were inside an iron container. Bracing his will he forced his hand around the hot handle and dragged the container to him. It was unexpectedly light. But at that raoment a hissing jet smote him in the back, and then shot under the table spreading thick foam everywhere. Reshetnikov turned his face away from the spray and through the mist saw a

seaman aiming a fire extinguisher at the table, the container of rockets, the wounded number one and himself.

"Don't! I've got it out," he yelled.

"There's a petrol tank just below," the seaman answered, aiming the jet at the blazing chart-table.

Reshetnikov dashed on deck with the container in his hand and flung it overboard. Another bomb screamed to starboard but he could think only of his hand; the skin of the palm and fingers was all shrivelled and turning deep red. An acute pain made him catch his breath. He stood shaking his wrist and blowing on the palm. Then he felt something touch him lightly on the shoulder. He looked round and saw an arm dangling from the bridge. Out of a sleeve that bore a lieutenant's bands of gold chevrons, blood was streaming. Reshetnikov looked up: the Captain of the sloop lay on the breast-rails of the bridge, his face down.

Reshetnikov's first impulse was to go to the captain's help. He sprang on to the bridge; but he noticed at once that the control handles of the engine-room telegraph stood wide apart which meant that the sloop was losing speed and turning in one place. He set the right hand control at "Stop" and looked up at the plane; it was getting into position for another dive right on to the sloop. He did not yet know which way he would have to steer the ship to escape the bomb about to be released. But when he saw the bomb flashing through the air he realized that it was going to fall short of the ship's bows and he at once swung all three handles over to "Full Speed Astern." A column of water rose ahead of the sloop and a blast of hot air and screaming splinters swept over his head, but Reshetnikov scarcely noticed that. He was delighted with his first success and, keeping his burned hand on the engine-room telegraph, looked again for the plane which was coming in for a fresh attack.

This the, however, Reshetnikov steered the sloop straight into the plane's flight so as to bring the fire of both machine-guns to bear directly on it. He waved his sound arm at the gunners and pointed to the plane. Apparently

they grasped his meaning, for two streams of broken light streaked across the sky, one of them lodging in the left wing of the plane, the other in the engine. The plane tried to lift its dark blunt nose out of the dive but its flight became convulsive and uncertain. The pilot lost control; side-slipping, then banking, its bombs not yet unloaded, it described a neat curve and plunged into the sea.

Reshetnikov could recall every detail of the scene though later he could never give a clear account of just when he had substituted his own seamen for the wounded members of the gun crew in the bows, or how he had crossed to a station starboard of the ship they were escorting and put up a well-placed screen of dense fire to meet another group of dive-bombers, or how another plane had been brought down during that attack. The excitement of battle bore him on its high impetuous wave, prompting him to take the necessary steps. Time became confused: seconds dragged like hours, and hours flashed by like moments. And only the pea jacket which he had been given on the sloop to replace his coat, scorched and finally ruined by the foam of the fire extinguisher-not to mention the deep burn on his palm, aggravated by the skin sticking to the controls of the engine-room telegraph—remained as evidence that the battle and the accidental, unreal, brief but, all the same, independent command he had taken of the sloop were not something dreamed. And from that time Lieutenant Reshetnikov had thought of nothing but sloops.

Several times he tried to raise the matter with the captain of the cruiser when he went to see him of an evening and revealed his dreams in long frank talks. But it did not work: he was highly valued in the cruiser as a gunnery officer who showed promise of becoming an expert; the captain even hinted at the possibility of a transfer to the main battery, something which a month before would estainly have made him leap with joy. And so Lieutenant Reshetnikov would have remained a gunnery officer but for a happy chance.

The day he was decorated he found himself in the Navy House next to a stranger, a captain, who had returned from the presentation table with a second Red Banner medal. Reshetnikov did not catch his name: he was too excited waiting for his own turn to come. When, at last, this happened and he returned to his place face aflame, with his Red Star, the captain glanced at him curiously.

"So you're Reshetnikov.... Congratulations.... Let me pin your medal on for you. You won't manage with that hand."

They fell into conversation. The captain turned out to be Vladykin. Vladykin! The commander of a flotilla of sloops at North Base! And Vladykin knew about what had happened on SK 0519, although the sloop was not in his flotilla! Reshetnikov's heart missed a beat.

They walked out together and for a full hour Reshetnikov told Vladykin everything he had been trying to make the captain of the cruiser understand. Vladykin stole glances at him with unconcealed interest, expressed his cordial agreement, put a few questions and, when they parted, said he would try to get Reshetnikov transferred to sloops. It was good when a man was so sure of what he wanted to do. For a fortnight Reshetnikov dreamed of nothing but the sloop he would soon command. Reality, however, proved to be something of a disappointment.

True, he was transferred to sloops, but not as the captain of a vessel as he had confidently hoped after his conversation with Vladykin. He was appointed gunnery officer of a flotilla of sloops, and it was not even the flotilla Vladykin was in command of, but a local one with the duty of guarding the base where the cruiser lay. He had to carry out tedious gunnery practice, to keep after the captains of the sloops about ammunition inspections, to fuss around the worksheep and busy himself with the gunners. In short, he did none of the things he had dreamed of when he asked to be transferred. He grasped every opportunity of going to sea with the sloops but those trips were not in the least like the

one on SK 0519. The sloops did dull patrol work, or went mine-sweeping, or did quiet escort work, turning over convoys to the sloops of another division at a port beyond which naval action could be expected. Only once or twice did he have to open fire on some plane or other that happened to be flying across waters far from the front. Yet on the northern waters of that same sea, up there, where Vladykin was, sloops like theirs were in action every day, were carrying raiding parties, sailing into the rear of the enemy by night, escorting convoys, engaging in violent encounters with aircraft. The fame of those sloops grew from day to day. So, naturally, Lieutenant Reshetnikov was thrilled when, four months later, he received orders to transfer to Vladykin's flotilla as captain of SK 0944, replacing Senior Lieutenant Paramonov who had been killed while landing a raiding party a week before.

Another man might have considered it a demotion to be transferred from a staff post to the command of a sloop; but for Reshetnikov it was the fulfilment of a dream. His messmates on the cruiser fully realized that when he went aboard to say good-bye. They congratulated him with unconcealed envy: a ship of his own, a small one, of course, but it meant complete independence, a chance to show what one was made of.

Reshetnikov felt full of self-respect when he left the flotilla and throughout the forty-eight hours' journey to the base where the damaged sloop was in refit he bore himself with dignity, keeping his youthful spirits under control, speaking slowly and ponderously to his travelling companions, and repeating if once then a hundred times phrases like "my sloop" and "in my ship" so that he became quite accustomed to those pleasant combinations of words. But when he reached a bomb-damaged quayside and saw "his ship" and "his crew" aboard it—twenty men lined up to meet a man in whom they would henceforth place their trust and from whom they expected constant, tireless action and orders to make their lives and their victory secure—Reshetnikov felt

his knees turn groggy and his throat become dry. His first bold greeting "Good morning, comrades," sounded hoarse and bewildered.

Strange to say, this ship—which was exactly like the sloops on which he had been to sea many times and which was so small that room could have been found for it on the deck of the cruiser without causing any congestion among the ship's boats—now seemed to him a quite unfamiliar vessel, twice as large and complicated as the cruiser itself. And although there were fewer ratings in the crew of the sloop than there were gunners in his flotilla he could distinguish only the one who stood on the right flank. That man's face, handsome and saturnine, expressed what seemed to be unconcealed disappointment: look what a pup they've sent us for a captain. And in that churlish look Reshetnikov read the worst—a fatal comparison with Senior Lieutenant Paramonov. Added to which was the fact he was soon to discover that this look belonged to Leading Seaman Nikita Khazov, who had served in sloops for seven years and held the post of boatswain on SK 0944; in other words, he was the captain's mainstay at sea, in storm and in battle.

Lieutenant Reshetnikov saw quite clearly that he would have to destroy the false impression that the boatswain, and probably the rest of the crew, had obtained from the hopelessly youthful look of their new captain. Unfortunately, there was absolutely no opportunity to play his trump card: the unexpected encounter on the deck had not given Reshetnikov time to take off his coat. So he raised his wristwatch to his eyes with that decisive gesture he had long admired in the captain of the cruiser and, glancing gaily down the line of men and still aping the other's tone, said jokingly but in a manner that brooked no retort:

"We" ... I don't think we'll exchange our warm greetings out here in the cold.... Comrade Lieutenant, muster the crew in the mess deck. We can get to know each other better there."

Then, still conscious of the mistrustful eyes of the boatswain on him, he tried to plunge as nimbly as possible down the narrow hatchway of the captain's cabin where, as he recalled from his trips on other sloops, his pistol holster would be bound to catch on some damned eyebolt, an obstacle that could cost a stranger a good deal of time. He overcame the obstacle successfully and, entering the tiny cabin where he was destined to live, slipped quickly out of his coat and carefully straightened his Red Star medal in front of the mirror.

That was his trump card: the medal ought to show the crew—and, above all, the boatswain—the sort of man they had to deal with, and tacitly underline all the significance of those few firm words he had prepared for his first meeting with them. He repeated those words to himself, beetling his brows and trying to replace the indecently cheerful look on his face with a stern and serious expression, but the mirror told him at once that his face had automatically broken into a smile; in the narrow corridor outside the door, boots were thundering and the voice of his first, Lieutenant Mikheyev, said: "Take it straight to the captain's cabin."

"The captain!" Involuntarily Reshetnikov winked at himself in the mirror and left the cabin. He noted with satisfaction that the sailor who was carrying his kit looked at the medal. He was in the highest spirits as he went aloft, strode towards the mess deck and heard the command "Shun!" ring out while his legs were still only just appearing in the hatchway. He replied with a resounding "At ease," sprang from the steep ladder and caught his breath.

Before him, standing closely together between the berths, were lines of calm-faced, fully-grown men in neat duffel shirts with blue collars. Nearly all of them wore a gleaming medal or the ribbons of some decoration. In the front row stood boatswain Khazov wearing the Red Bann. I medal and a Gallantry Badge.

The blood rushed to Reshetnikov's face. The ruse he had devised to create an impression on these men, and especial-

ly on Khazov, now seemed silly, unworthy and unbearably shameful. In his confusion he avoided the sailors' eyes and all those phrases which had seemed to him so necessary and important, and that he had weighed so carefully—phrases about military duty, the honour of men of the Black Sea Fleet, the bravery that the motherland expected from them—all suddenly flew out of his mind. The living embodiment of courage, of the honour of the fleet and duty fulfilled were standing in front of him and it was he, Lieutenant Alexei Reshetnikov, who now had to command these men, everyone of whom had faced death often and yet was ready to face it again... And at that thought so powerful an emotion seized him that, forgetting everything, he blurted out what was in his thoughts and what, of course, he would in no other circumstances have said:

"So that's the kind you are, friends.... How am I going to command a sloop like this?"

Had any other spoken these words the authority of the new captain in the eyes of the crew would certainly have been ruined once and for all; the men would have thought he was trying to ingratiate himself. But Reshetnikov had spoken so sincerely and there was so much amazed joy in his embarrassed expression that everybody took to him at once. Artiushin, always the first, replied without hesitation:

"If you manage the way you did on 0519 we won't object, Comrade Lieutenant..."

The rest of the men smiled their approval, but Reshetnikov felt all the more embarrassed.

"D'you mean to say you were on 0519?" he asked at a loss for words.

"Oh, no, Comrade Lieutenant," said Artiushin with the same verve. "I'm local, a native, you might say. Why, I've been at the wheel here since the defence of Odessa began. The other fellows told me about it. You know yourself, it's like on a collective farm in the sloops: everybody knows the cottage where there's ale brewing and where they've got a new gramophone. . . . Just neighbourly gossip of course."

Artiushin spoke banteringly but from the expectant curious looks of the rest of the men Reshetnikov realized this was no question of neighbourly gossip: the crew had found out the name of their new captain and zealously gleaned all the information they could find about him from all the sloops so that they already had a full picture of his character, and now only needed to check its accuracy by first-hand observation. And in Artiushin's eyes he read the first, bitter—and justly deserved—hint of reproach: You've failed, Captain, it said.... See, we know everything about you, but it's news to you that we've got lots of medals here....

Artiushin, probably, had no such thoughts in his mind. But Reshetnikov always imagined that others were condemning his mistakes and shortcomings in the sharpest, cruellest terms. He cursed himself for his childish impetuosity. Of course he should have waited at flotilla headquarters until Vladykin returned from sea, and had a talk with him about the sloop to find out what kind of crew manned her. Instead, he had been too impatient to wait till the next morning and had hurried on board "his sloop" so as to "take up his command" as soon as possible.... And there he was, up to his neck in it....

He had no idea what to do or say next. But that bluntness of his which had often got him into trouble now came to his rescue: he took off his cap and sitting down on someone's berth said simply and with feeling:

"Sit down, comrades, let's have a chat.... I don't know anything at all about this ship. Chief was at sea when I arrived at headquarters yesterday. So we'll have to introduce ourselves.... Tell me about this sloop of ours."

The talk lasted till nightfall. When he returned to his cabin Reshetnikov lay awake for a long time before falling asleep. He tossed and turned in his narrow, shore berth, listening to the quiet splash of water against the plating and thinking of the ship with which his life and his honour as a commander were now bound.

The Danube and Odessa, Sevastopol and Novorossiisk, night raids and long storms, landings and mine-sweeping, battles and accidents—the whole brilliant and tragic history of this cockle-shell of a ship passed and repassed before his mind's eye. And the men who had carried out all these heroic deeds on the ship, were, it seemed to him, watching him out of the darkness and asking: "And now how are you going to command us?"

In his memory he sorted those faces which he had only just come to know; he tried to remember who it was who had hurled the hand grenade back from the boat. Was it Khazov or Moroshkin? Who had brought down that plane in the fog, just as it came swooping down on to the sloop? Who was it who had stood up to his waist in icy water supporting the gangplank down which the landing party scrambled towards the shore? Who had that "sniper's" sight which put everyone at their ease when he was on the look-out? Was it someone who was no longer with the ship and who had passed into legend ... someone who had been killed or sent to the rear, gravely wounded?...

Men and their deeds grew confused in his mind. But in his disturbed imagination there formed with increasing clarity and sharpness the image of one man—Senior Lieutenant Paramonov, the man who had commanded the sloop for the past ten months; everything the men had told him about the sloop was inseparably linked with him. And as he tossed sleeplessly Lieutenant Reshetnikov thought about that man whom he had never seen or known but whom he had been sent to replace. Would these men ever speak about him with the respect, love and sadness with which they spoke of Senior Lieutenant Paramonov now?... And, perhaps, for the first time in his life Reshetnikov really understood what a captair is—the spirit and will of a ship, its courage and salvation, its mind and its conscience.

And that long night prompted him to do something that laid the foundation of his friendship with the crew of the sloop: over the door in the forecastle eight-berth mess deck

appeared a picture of Senior Lieutenant Paramonov. It was a small picture in a simple frame. But when Reshetnikov hung it up and then turned to face the sailors who had been watching him in silence he saw that their eyes glistened. And his own throat felt constricted when he said quietly: "Well, let him see how we'll fight without him..."

### CHAPTER THREE

Reshetnikov's lively and sociable nature quickly drew people to him, and a stranger might have thought he always had friends around him. In fact the people he had gone about with at the Naval College and in the cruiser were little more than chance acquaintances, men with whom he could joke and argue and converse on a thousand and one topics, even share with them many of his thoughts and feelings. But to none of them had he ever felt inclined to disclose what it was that troubled his spirit so profoundly. And so he was alone with his own thoughts and inner conflicts.

It was very hard to express clearly what this important thing was that troubled Reshetnikov so profoundly.

For all his gay nature, his vivaciousness and genuine youthful spirit, his apparently complete self-confidence, Reshetnikov in reality suffered from a vague, undefined feeling that he was failing to understand something very important in life. For some time he had been waiting for something to happen, something which would suddenly make everything clear: an aim to be striven for would flash in the deep dusk, a repetition of a moment he had known with a similar exaltation of feeling long ago that noon of August the Seventh, 1937, when over the edge of the steppe a black cloud had hung halfway up the sky. Then it had come to him as a perfectly clear "revelation" that he had to be a naval officer and that there was no other path for him in life.

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Reshetnikov had spent his boyhood far from any sea in the Altai, on the state cattle farm where his father, Sergei Petrovich Reshetnikov, worked as a veterinary surgeon.

Sergei Petrovich had not taken up that profession by mere chance but through deep inner conviction. He had given up medical practice for it. He was quite possessed with a craze for newly-born animals and their problems of diet and disease, and had done serious research on raising a new breed of sheep which could live in the north Kazakh steppes and in the foothills of the Altai. For many years he patiently crossed different breeds with the ordinary Kazakh sheep, trying to get a breed that would combine fine wool with fleshiness and which could stand the climate and fodder of those parts. Sergei Petrovich instilled much passionate feeling into this far from poetical occupation that he gave it not only a poetical but a philosophical significance: he considered it to be the mission of homo sapiens to protect life in all its forms, to fan its wonderful spark with care and to perfect those forms for the benefit of a mankind which was correcting blind Nature. And every time his four-legged friends delighted him with an abundant litter or a successful hybrid there was rejoicing in the little house on the outskirts of the farm and stout Parfyonovna, who was Alexei's nurse, the family cook and the constant lab assistant of Sergei Petrovich, would bake a pirog in honour of the birth of the latest twins or of some longwooled lambkin.

That was why it was impossible to move a foot in any room of the house without hearing something squeal or bleat. The various pedigree offsprings that were so dear to Sergei Petrovich's heart were reared in the house until their processence began to threaten the furniture or crockery. Angona kids with melancholy innocent eyes and hooves like fragile Chinese porcelain; Lincolnshire lambs with long curly wool as sleek as silk; Hereford calves, as massive as if forged in some unusually tough pig iron, their incipient

horns raising protuberances in their flat broad foreheads; pink, scuttling piglets of ancient breeds with unpronounceable names; even a foal, lanky, thin and long-legged. All of them were kept spotlessly clean by constant scrubbing on the part of Parfyonovna, Alexei's mother, and Alexei himself; all of them were contented, well-fed and gentle, with such names as "Pannochka," "Mazepa," "Ruslan," "Demon," "Kashtanka." Those were Alexei's names for them and they depended on what his mother happened to be reading aloud to him of an evening.

As a child, Alexei loved to play with the animals. Sometimes, tired from play, he would grasp hold of one of the trembling little bodies and flop on to the sofa with it, pressing his cheek against the fluffy warm wool. Eyes closed, he would listen to the tiny heart's timid beating and then it seemed to him that this wonderful spark his father used to talk about was flickering and flaring as if about to fail. He would be overwhelmed with a wave of pity and alarm. It was quite clear he would have to take urgent measures to keep that spark aglow. He would jump up and dash to his father shouting that "Onegin" was perishing; the word "dying," in his opinion, was insufficiently tragic. Tugging his reddish beard, Sergei Petrovich would also bend over the helpless little animal, then straighten his back and console Alexei with a smile. They would sit side by side on the sofa and Sergei Petrovich would scratch his son's favourite behind the ear, and would tell him that if the kid felt ill it would itself find a herb which would cure it, although no one had taught it to do so. He would warm to his subject and, forgetting that he was talking to a child, launch forth on a rapturous biological poem glorifying the great power of a wonderful mysterious 'flame. He spoke about life which paved its own way ahead, improving from generation to generation, flowering in new, alway better forms; and he convinced his son that in taking care of every life, protecting it, and helping it lies the essence of the existence of man, the most intelligent of living crea-

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tures, and, for that reason, charged with a responsibility for them all. Young Alexei did not follow everything, but a love for a world replete with life filled his heart with sweetness. He longed for everything to become beautiful and happy just as soon as possible.

When he was thirteen he experienced a shock which suddenly brought his father's philosophy crashing down in ruins. This happened in the town where his father sent him to stay with an aunt during the winter so that he could study at a secondary school.

It occurred to some thoughtless teacher to arrange for the school children to visit a meat-packing factory— "with the aim of completing their understanding of the supreme importance of cattle-breeding in the district"; other officials, who, despite all their confident uncouth phrases about child psychology, were in reality quite indifferent to the children's welfare, raised no objections to this criminally stupid plan.

The stuffy, oppressive smell of blood met the children from the moment they crossed the threshold. Warm, dark-coloured blood streamed along channels in the floor; there was blood on the white overalls the people wore as they darted through the moist warm mist rising from the steaming carcasses. There were people stripping skins, hacking off hooves, sawing through horns, and everywhere an endless line of skinned red carcasses, suspended from overhead rails, moved slowly on, bumping against the children.

Pale with agitation, their hearts aflutter, the children did their best to look unmoved by it all, as they jostled each other in a wavering line at the heels of their complacent teacher. The teacher went on questioning the expert who accompagied the excursion, reeling off figures and names and teamical details.

Finally, they were taken to a light, spacious hall. Though the place was empty, quiet and clean, there was something terribly sinister about it. Cunningly constructed partitions led to platforms with all kinds of hooks and chains and strange swaying boards. Touching the shiny lever beside one of the boards the engineer said in the calm tone he had used hitherto:

"Actually this is where the process of liberating the animals from life takes place. They are brought in here, then..."

That was as much as Alexei heard, so shocked was he by that unusual formulation "liberating from life." The children—thank God—were spared a demonstration of how the slaughtering was done and were taken out on to the fifth floor landing adjoining that terrible hall. From there they could see far below the stockyards that were packed with beasts that mooed, bleated, grunted. Alexei could distinguish Herefords and Yorkshires and Lincolnshires—all the breeds his father raised, and it occurred to him with horror that among them his "Pannochka" or "Onegin" might be rushing about panic-stricken.

This revelation left him quite crushed.

Could it be true that the only purpose of that wonderful spark of life, the care of which his father considered to be the very sense of his own existence, was to allow nature to accumulate a sufficient quantity of meat, fats and bone, only to be "liberated" from it in this place, as if from some unneeded and irksome thing?

He began to see the world in colours quite different from those his father had painted; the paradise that reigned in the little house on the outskirts of the state farm lost its radiance.

He was an altogether different boy when he went home the following summer. The raptures his father went into about the dear little creatures born during the spring seemed hypocritical or blind or, worst of all, just agrorant. For a long time he had not the courage to put a straight question to his father, but one day during the usual party for the birth of a lamb of just the weight Sergei Petrovich had wanted, he could no longer contain his feelings and

blurted out everything he had seen at the meat-packing place and what he thought of it. He spoke with that passion, inspiration, indignation and sorrow that only youth is capable of expressing when it first encounters and recognizes injustice.

His words had an extraordinary effect. He drew so vivid a picture that his mother was shocked to tears. Parfyonovna sobbed, clutching the doomed lamb to her capacious bosom. Sergei Petrovich sat in silence for a minute, looked at Alexei with a new, grave interest and said that it seemed his son was growing up.

Nothing that his father told him in the long and frequent talks they had afterwards could convince Alexei in the least. He understood very well that all the beneficial changes he saw around him in the lives of the people he lived with—the solidly-built houses with electric light, the schools and hospitals, ample food and working conditions improved by mechanization—could not have happened if the collective and state farm herds, the basis of these people's well-being, had not improved in size and quality in recent years. He saw quite clearly, too, that there was a direct connection between every increase in the weight of a lamb and the fate of every infant playing in its birthday suit in the yurtas; and that on such things depended the chances of education, of improvement and, in the final count, of happiness. It followed from this that his father had been doing an important, very necessary and valuable work in increasing the number of lambs and improving their quality.

Alexei even went so far as to concede that since every living creature had to die sometime, the problem was only how to make its short existence and inevitable death most useful to other beings—in this case to the people.

But he egh his mind was convinced, his feelings firmly rejected these incontestable truths. Maybe if he had not gone on that territying excursion the problem of life and death would have opened before him gradually and imperceptibly—as it does during the course of all human life, where every

awakening has its proper time. Or, perhaps, it would have been otherwise: he might have passed the problem by indifferently, as many do, without giving a thought, and sometimes without wishing to give a thought, to what is life and death. But the problem which confronted him so early, when neither his mind nor his feelings were mature or strong, was beyond his comprehension and forces.

Life, which plunges into death in order to rise again in new, unrecognizable forms; the blossom that springs from decay; disappearance before renascence; the endless revolution of matter, indestructible and eternal in its manifestation in different forms—all this his young soul, so much in love with everything alive, accepted not as a balanced system by which life moves and develops but as a monstrous, unjust set of contradictions. The fact that the lives destroyed in that slaughter-house were providing sustenance to other, more advanced, creatures—human beings—could in no way fit in with the concept of the "wonderful spark" which had stirred and moved him so deeply before, and which his father himself cited and supported with such loving care.

So his relations with his father became cool. His powers of reasoning exhausted, Sergei Petrovich took recourse in irony. He proposed that the boy be at least consistent and stop smacking his lips over a sucking-pig in aspic or stuffing his cheeks with those dumplings in whose juicy interior Parfyonovna, true to Siberian tradition, mixed the lives of oxen, pigs and calves! This would rile Alexei and he would retort that if one was employed on supplying cattle for the slaughter-house one should not utter beautiful phrases about how precious every life was and about the "wonderful sparks." Then Sergei Petrovich would flare up and shout that he could not permit a slip of a lad to offend his convictions, and the meal would often end with Motkon in tears and Alexei dashing off for thirty kilometres on his pike to spend three or four days with his friend Vasya Glukhov, a son of the officer in command of a local detachment of the border guards.

The detachment was stationed near the frontier of China on the shores of a big lake in the steppe. Since the previous year when Vasya's elder brother Nikolai came back at the end of the summer on leave from the Frunze Naval College, where he was studying, the boys had acquired a sailing-boat... It was, in fact, an ordinary fishing boat like those that went out in packs on the lake with nets. But Nikolai, wanting to show the two lads his ability as a sailor, fixed a keel, cut a slit foresail out of an old strip of tenting, erected shrouds and sheets and taught them both the art of tacking against the wind. The boat became known as the "whaleboat" and behaved excellently, to the astonishment of the fishermen who in their heavy straight-sailed boats had, since time immemorial, taken to the oars against the wind.

Every time Alexei came to see Vasya the boys worked till late at night carefully collecting all the things they needed for a long voyage: the notebook in which were written Nikolai's legacy of naval phrases and commands; another one with a waterproof cover which served as the ship's log; a petrol tin for drinking water (the water of the lake was excellent, but that was what was required in a naval vessel); buckets and fishing-rods, matches, shotguns, and a compass which Vasya borrowed from his father's kit for each voyage and which always pointed faithfully to the nearest gun barrel. Loading everything on board, the friends would put out at dawn as if the lake were the ocean: in fact, it spread far across the steppe and from the middle its low shores were out of sight.

They would spend the first twenty-four hours "in the open sea," taking over from each other the duties and rights of captain and crew, eating the food they had brought from the shore, resolutely drinking their tepid, petrol-flavoured "drinking water." On the evening of the second day the crew usually want down with scurvy or mutinied on account of the food and then it was usually decided to raid the enemy coast for fresh provisions. According to the season and the place where the mishap befell, the enemy coast was either the

western cape where the vegetable gardens of the farm of the frontier guards lay, or the southern bay where there was excellent fishing, or the river estuary whose reeds held abundant duck and other game.

And there, with the remarkable fickleness of youth, Alexei would lie for hours in the bottom of the boat, armed with a gun, ready to extinguish the "wonderful spark" of life with a shot as he waited for a brood of duck to float quacking and splashing out of the reeds. Incidentally, there was make-belief in this, too: the ducks were enemy ships trying to break the blockade and the double-barrelled gun the great gunturret of a dreadnought, while he himself was the captain, calm, authoritative and always with a pipe between his teeth. That romantic picture was a mixture of everything young Alexei had heard about the sea or read about it in the books Vasya brought home from the school, detachment or town libraries, affirming that out here in the steppe there was no one who could appreciate those books as well as he, the born sailor.

When Alexei returned home he preferred to keep mum about those trips on the lake, and about the duck-shooting, too. Firstly, because there was no point in upsetting his mother who had a mortal dread of water in any quantity larger than the tubful, in which she used to bathe him as a baby, and who blessed the farm just because it had no pond for Alexei to drown himself in. And secondly, he would have found absolutely nothing to reply to his father who would undoubtedly have been interested to know how he, who so passionately accused his father of being a murderer, could himself destroy life—and with his own hands, too.... It would, really, have been no good trying to explain to him that these adventures at sea, with the crew on the verge of starvation, were no occasion for being over-delicate about means. Especially as duck grilled on a skewer in the smoke of a camp-fire had a wonderful, quite special taste.... And as for getting his father to see that it wasn't a duck at all but an enemy schooner loaded with food and that the shooting in the reeds was not hunting at all but a naval engagement—well, that was out of the question.

On the "whale-boat" the two boys talked about everything in the world, but the topic that interested them most was what they were going to be when they grew up; it was really time to give that some serious thought, for after all they were getting on for fourteen.... Maybe because Vasya lived in the keyed-up atmosphere of a frontier post, or because people of his age are specially receptive to what is implied but not given tongue, to what is written between the lines—one way or another the great and terrible subject of war entered the conversation of these two youngsters who were little more than children. It was incontestably clear to both of them that sooner or later there would be a war against fascism; the only question was whether they would grow up in time to take part in it. And for that reason it was their plain duty to prepare to defend the Revolution and the Soviet Union in a man-of-war, preferably together on the same one. And one day they sailed the "whale-boat" into the middle of the lake, hoisted a real naval ensign which they had made for the occasion, and standing to attention took a solemn oath to enter the Frunze Naval College.

Since that day Alexei dreamed of nothing but the Navy. To be honest, there was still a good deal that was unclear in that dream. Out there on the lake he argued hotly with Vasya whether it was the Germans or the British who were the real victors at Jutland, and whether torpedo attack or gunfire was decisive in battle. Out there he had not the slightest doubt that he would one day become a gunnery officer in a ship of the line. But here at home, as he sat in the deep shadow of a resinous pine, reading Staniukovich or Robert Louis Stevenson, he thought with quite different feelings alor the lake and the "whale-boat" that awaited him there.

For some reason, it was not the arguments about weapons and manoeuvres that he recalled. He remembered the moist air of the lake, the sense of vast space, the fresh breeze that billowed the sail and rocked the "whale-boat," those two violent storms in which they had been dangerously near drowning and which they casually referred to afterwards as "not bad little storms." He remembered the solemn, enchanting silence of sunset and dawn, the mysterious haze of low-lying mist on the water. But most important and dearest of all was the creaking of the mast and the murmur of the water as the boat glided through it, and that steady, irresistible motion as the boat pressed on, ever on, racing, striving, shooting ahead through the broad smooth expanse of water where all ways are equally accessible and equally entrancing... And the sea—remote, enormous, spilling into the oceans of all the world, the sea he had never seen but longed for so much, bewitched him and called him to it.

He did not yet fully understand that call, he did not know just what he would do on the sea—be a gunnery officer aboard a man-of-war or the captain of a steamer in the Soviet Merchant Navy. The second prospect attracted him more. That meant the way to the world, to unknown lands and distant cities, to India, and Australia, the Arctic; and deep down in Alexei's heart he confessed to himself that what appealed to him was not war but the sea, not fighting but navigation, not guns but the compass.

Yet, so as not to unsettle their friendship, he did not, for the time being, speak to Vasya about these ideas. And so, when they both went back to the town in the autumn, both boys were frantically active in their propaganda for the Navy. In the Young Pioneer group at school they delivered lectures on warships, naval battles, and naval history; in the naval circle they taught other boys Morse and signalling; they read together the books and magazines which came regularly from Leningrad thanks to Nikolai, who way a warm supporter of their craze; both boys won the glorious reputation of knowing all there was to know about the Navy. Yet sometimes when he was on his own, Alexei would feel as if he had been brought to an abrupt stop during a run and,

pulling himself together and looking around, he would try to understand what exactly was happening.

It really was a muddle: everybody was sure that when they left school, Reshetnikov and Glukhov would go to Leningrad and enter the Frunze Naval College whatever other boys might do, and yet here he was not sure about it himself. In moments of quiet reflection his heart again swelled with that familiar stirring dream about the sea, broad and boundless, about long, distant voyages, unknown shores and quiet sunsets, solemn and majestic, that concealed that rarest of miracles, the green light, which could be seen only on the ocean and then only by a favoured few.

Alexei learned about this light and the legend concerning it during the winter when Vasya, on one of his frantic searches in the town library for books about the sea, found a novel by Jules Verne called The Green Ray. The boys devoured the book in one gulp, although there was not so much in it about adventures at sea as about some silly chump who travelled all over the world in search of the last ray of the setting sun—an emerald-green light which brought happiness to the man who saw it. The phenomenon aroused their interest, however, and during the summer they carried out a number of scientific experiments, observing sunsets over the lake from their "whale-boat." They saw no green light on those occasions although Vasya, risking much for the sake of science, borrowed his father's binoculars each time. They wrote specially to no less an authority than Nikolai himself. He replied that he had never actually seen the green light though he had been to sea four summers running but that the legend did exist among old sailors, especially in the merchant marine. Then Alexei declared that, probably the ray was only to be seen on the ocean; how could it be called a rare natural phenomenon if anyone could see it in any old place. Vasya then asserted that as it was a matter of physics, being simply the break-up of the sun's spectrum in the lower layers of the atmosphere, it

could also happen on the lake if the atmosphere was dense enough and the horizon clear.

However, work was started at the frontier post on a highdiving board, then the two boys embarked on the hard task of learning the crawl stroke and their experiments were forgotten. But the green light remained for Alexei a symbol of the ocean and of everything connected with its expanse.

Sometimes, at sunset, when the sun slid slowly to the edge of the steppe, which lay as flat as the sea itself, his heart was possessed by a sweet, enchanting longing. He imagined that same sunset over the real ocean and it seemed to him that when he saw it for the first time a magic green light would shine from the water, to assure him that happiness would at last be his if he chose that desirable, tempting ocean as his way in life. . . .

And perhaps this vision would have prevailed on him had the following summer not revealed to him just what it was that drew him to the sea.

When Alexei returned home to the farm for the school holidays he found his father limping. It transpired that "Rusalka," that same one who used to scamper about the house on her tiny hooves, had landed a sharp kick on Sergei Petrovich as he leant over her to cauterize a wound on her back. The leg went on aching for a long time and the local doctor advised Sergei Petrovich to go for treatment at the Sechenov Institute of Physical Treatment at Sevastopol. Sergei Petrovich announced this to his wife over tea that evening, adding with a sly wink that it might not be a bad idea if they all went together, showed Alexei Moscow on the way and gave him a chance of taking a look at the Crimea. The bonuses he'd received lately would cover it easily. Alexei held his breath, his heart missed a beat, and, with his mouth full of hot tea, he cast a look of entreaty at his mother whose vote would be decisive in a family matter of such importance. And his mother, on seeing the trembling supplication in his eyes, agreed, without suspecting what that look of entreaty meant and what it would lead to.

It was all like a dream: the train, the stations, the new faces, Moscow, Red Square, Lenin's Mausoleum, tramcars, Alexei had never seen them before, the noise and bustle, the streets flooded with light, and then the train again, fields and forests, tunnels, the Crimea, sunshine. . . . All that was mixed up in a haze somewhere in the memory. One thing alone remained reality: the Black Sea, vast, real, salty, the great murmuring sea, blessed and long-awaited. . . .

It burst into his heart when he saw a huge bay, glittering in the window of the railway carriage after a long tunnel. Its deep blue waters lay at the foot of sloping cliffs of green and white, but Alexei did not have time to distinguish what those things like dashes and hyphens were that dotted the soft blue silk of the water before the train swung round a curve and the bay disappeared. Only later, as a tramcar took them into town along the steep gradients and the bay came fully into view, did he realize that those punctuation marks were warships.

These ships lay in the centre of his attention all the time he spent in that town of the Navy and the sea. He would sit for hours on the quay with the colonnade, watching naval rowing boats and launches as they arrived and departed, or hang about the Primorsky Boulevard near the Memorial to Sunken Ships, eagerly scanning the cruisers, destroyers and submarines that passed close to the defence boom. He spent the money which his mother gave him for the cinema on something else; he would hire a canoe from the Yacht Club and set out on an inspection of the warships moored in the bay. Enraptured he would paddle slowly along the blue-grey sides of the battleships and the cruisers; he would stop and lay the warm wet paddle on his bare legs and listen to the boatswain's pipe, bells, whistles, bugles, to the voices raised in command or in song; he would ogle the guns, ship's boats and bridges, ready to hug and kiss every anchor chain dangling in the water, provided the sentry at the jack staff allowed the canoe to come close enough.

Alexei would have given much for one glance at the mysterious life that went on inside the clean blue-grey hulls of the ships. Rocking in his canoe he dreamed of a miracle to come. There were plenty to choose from. What if a secret document should be wafted out of a porthole by some draught? He would fish it out of the water and hand it over to the captain. Or if a sailor got into difficulties while bathing? He would rescue him, pull him into the canoe and deliver him to the captain. Or perhaps a ship's boat unsecurely fastened by a guy at the stern would be borne out to sea. He would overtake it, take it in tow and deliver it to the captain. Or some spy in a canoe just like his would creep up to the side of the ship with an infernal machine. He would seize him and deliver him to the captain.... All miracles had to end the same way—a meeting with the captain, who would ask what Alexei wanted in the way of reward. To which Alexei modestly replies that there is nothing he wants except permission to see the ship or (and of this he entertained doubts even in his dreams—it seemed too much to ask for) to be taken along on a trip.

But the miracle did not occur and the days passed and soon he would have to leave Sevastopol without having had a chance of seeing a ship properly. Then suddenly, five days before leaving, the miracle fell plumb at his feet—incredibly simply like all real miracles.

That Sunday morning he was sitting on the quay on his favourite bench near the colonnade. The wireless was playing, the sun shone, the deep blue bay lay at the foot of the steps, the warships rode at their buoys like a distant dream. Now and again motor boats and launches left them: it was the time Sunday shore-leave began. The sailors sprang out of the launches, filled the whole quayside, then ran up the steps and poured into the square. From the colonnade it looked as if a smooth wave was breaking from the tray on to the quay: now the steps would disappear under a blue and white wave of sailors, now they would reappear, and the bright splashes of girls' dresses swirled in the wave, like

flower petals tossed by the breaking crest. Soon the force of the wave was spent but at the edge of the quay there still stood a mixed bunch of dresses and check-patterned shirts; Alexei saw that it was a party for one of the regular excursions to the warships; they were waiting for a launch.

He felt a pang of envy as he watched the noisy group of young people. How awful it was, after all, to be on one's unorganized own! Some girl for whom it was quite the same whether she went to the Zoo or on a cruiser was now off to the ship, while he.... And noticing that three girls of this category who had grown tired of waiting under the blazing sun were hurrying to his bench, he got up to go. Suddenly one of them greeted him politely by name. He recognized her as a nurse called Panechka who was looking after his father in the sanatorium. She began talking to him about his approaching departure and asked him whether he had managed to see everything in Sevastopol, but they were interrupted at that point by a young man in a chequered shirt who came up with a list in his hand. He asked whether anyone had seen a certain Petka. The girls said that this being a Sunday Petka had probably overslept. This was too much for Alexei; he declared angrily that Petka ought to be shot for it. The girls burst out laughing, the young man looked at him in surprise. Then Panechka explained that he was Alexei Reshetnikov, a Young Pioneer from the Altai. The young man in the chequered shirt turned out to be from the town Komsomol committee, so Alexei could talk to him as man to man. He drew him aside and poured out his soul to him—poured it out very fast, too, for the launch from the cruiser was approaching. The young man replied that he could not take an extra passenger, but that if Petka did not turn up in time, well....

Petka did not turn up—and the miracle came to pass.

That evening Alexei returned to the small room he and his mother had taken near the sanatorium in such transports that his mother asked him what had happened. He at once gave her an honest account of everything—his friend-

ship with Vasya, their trips on the lake, and his love for the sea. He told her that now, after he had been aboard the cruiser and felt its guns with his own hands, he had taken the final, firm and if revocable decision that the only road for him to take after leaving school was the one that led to the Naval College. His mother burst into tears and said people get drowned at sea. Alexei laughed, hugged her affectionately and sat down beside her. They spent one of those evenings that are so precious in the friendship of a mother and her growing son—an evening of frank talk, heart-to-heart confessions, tears, expressions of readiness to make mutual sacrifices—and finally Alexei won from his mother a promise not to interfere in his talk with his father.

This talk Alexei postponed until the return to the farm: it was impossible to raise the question in the train, within hearing of strangers. Only back in the Altai, after he had first seen Vasya and worked himself up to white-hot excitement with his tales of Sevastopol and the cruiser, did Alexei make up his mind to speak to his father. But there was always something in the way: his father would be in a bad humour, or Alexei would feel "off form" for such a serious conversation, or he hesitated about whether he should tackle his father by himself or bring in his mother as an ally. So the conversation was put off again and again until it happened all by itself one day when Alexei's father invited him to come along on a ride to the mountain pastures of the farm herds.

After they had ridden for an hour the steppe was replaced by wooded foothills. The pines and firs grew higher and more thickly. Finally the travellers rode into an old pine forest. In contrast to the parched heat of the steppe here the air was cool and fresh; the weary ponies stepped slowly side by side, gingerly treading the soft, slippery carpet of last year's pine needles yellowing at the foot of the mighty, redtinged trunks. A majestic silence reigned over the tree tops and after the glare of the boundless steppes everything seemed plunged in twilight. Yet a sunbeam or two would

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pierce the foliage with a bright narrow spear and pick out an ant-hill in some deep cleft between the roots, or a moss-grown stump with a pool of blackish water in it, or shine on a cluster of plump drops of amber-hued resin trickling down the tree trunks, and everything the beams touched would acquire sudden colour and volume, catching the eye and riveting the attention. Swaying in the saddle Alexei long watched this play of light in silent admiration and then suddenly smiled. His father stole a glance at him.

"What's the joke?"

"I was thinking of something."

"Just what?"

"How can I put it?" said Alexei with a laugh, and turned his animated face to his father. "Do you ever feel that everything has suddenly become plain and clear? Just like now: the sun caught that ant-hill and you could see it. If it hadn't we'd have ridden by without noticing it."

"I've never managed to see everything plain and clear," his father replied smiling. "But I can sometimes make a few guesses. Not suddenly, though."

"But that's just the point—suddenly," Alexei insisted. "Suddenly... a fellow worries and worries, thinks and thinks, hesitates, can't make up his mind. And suddenly... everything's clear. And it all looks so simple—and clear, that's the main thing. So clear, so easy that you want to yell about it." And his voice rang out in a happy shout.

The pony jerked forward and Sergei Petrovich, reining in his own mount, laughed in enjoyment of his son's mood: there was such spontaneous happiness on the boy's sunburned face, such brightness in his eyes, such resolve in every limb of that thin, youthful body bent in the saddle that it seemed only the word needed to be said for Alexei to whip his pony and dash away to that distant splendid goal which he alove could see, which had only just come into his ken, and which he did not recognize as anything more than a dream of youth, conjured up by a feverish imagination, a mirage that dissolves in the air as soon as it had beckoned

to a man in the desert where he will long be searching for that fine beautiful thing that drew him out there.... Sergei Petrovich loved his son for the way he flared up, but in his heart of hearts he considered it a dangerous trait which might lead the boy to make many mistakes in life.

"H'm, what a little hothead you are," said Sergei Petrovich, still smiling. "You're a happy age... Well, never mind. What is it they say? 'Let us forgive the fever heat of youth, and youth's delirium sweet'.... But remember one thing: that sort of inspiration, my friend, isn't worth a damn. A man has to make up his mind for himself; it's not something that comes dropping from heaven."

"You don't understand," said Alexei with a gesture of irritation. "I'm not saying it comes from heaven. Of course, a man has to think and suffer a lot first, but then.... It's a leap, you see," he added with an air of importance. "A transformation of quantity into quality."

"Ah," said his father with equal gravity. "So that's what it is. Then it's all quite clear. And what sort of leap did you take?"

He spoke quite seriously but Alexei detected a gleam of laughter in his eye and this hurt him: did his father still take him for a kid who couldn't reason or decide something for himself? And suddenly he found himself talking about the "revelation" that had come to him in Sevastopol on the deck of the cruiser.

Sergei Petrovich listened to him without interrupting or even looking at him. His head lowered, he looked straight between the quivering ears of his pony; silently he followed the impetuous torrent of words which, at long last, had burst from Alexei's heart. They were remarkable words, words of dreams and hopes, words full of youthful ardour and frenzy, a whole poem of the sea, of ships and guns, a veritable thesis on the martial duty of man, a passionate confession of belief in his calling. He spoke quietly and with feeling, staring into the forest twilight as if he saw something vague beckoning him in the distance. And only when everything

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had fallen into its place and he had concluded that his choice of profession was definitely the Navy and nothing else did Alexei turn to his father.

But then he was seized by a sharp pang of pity. His father was drooping in the saddle with a face that looked thoroughly unhappy. For a minute or two they rode in silence, only the faint rustle of the pine needles under the horses' hooves and the jingle of the stirrups breaking the stillness of the forest. Alexei heartily cursed that silence which had put him in the mood for frankness, and the patches of sunshine which had reminded him of that wonderful buoyant feeling he had experienced on the deck of the cruiser when he had had his sudden "revelation." His high spirits had vanished and he rode on suffering tortures: he had been wrong to start that conversation, everything would have worked out all right by itself in time and his father would not have worn that downcast look which was worse than when he was angry.... Alexei was on the point of coming to his father's help with a friendly word or two, for it was obvious that he had taken the news very badly, when Sergei Petrovich, his eyes still fixed somewhere between his pony's ears, said quietly:

"So that's that.... Well, you really have grown up.... A bit early, of course, to decide all your fate at fourteen, but it's no good kicking against the pricks, I see.... So you've really made up your mind?"

"Yes, I have," Alexei said guiltily.

"Very well, then. There's only one thing I want to ask you: are you quite sure that it's really the Navy that you feel drawn to?"

"Quite," said Alexei, mustering all his conviction.

"Not the sea?"

"The sea?" asked Alexei guardedly: all those things which he thought had disappeared without trace in Sevastopol—the ocean, long voyages, in short, the "green light"—rose before his mind's eye once more. His father seemed to have overheard his most secret—and most terrible—doubts.

"Yes, the sea. Simply the sea. Water, waves, distant horizons, travel, and so on. The sea has an elemental beauty and attraction that can grip one, you know."

"Oh, of course, the sea.... You can't join the Navy without loving the sea: that's one and the same thing...."

•"Now you're not getting my point," his father said seriously, looking at him for the first time. "What I want to know is whether you're really certain what it is that attracts you. Maybe it's just that you want to go to sea. Nothing more. To go on voyages and see the world, eh?"

"It's like this, you see...." Alexei faltered as he bent to adjust his stirrup. "Before we went to Sevastopol I was in a bit of a muddle myself... probably because I'd not seen a warship—except in pictures. But there.... Well, I've just told you: it's an absolutely special sort of feeling...."

Then he straightened his back, looked up with a face that was flushed as much from embarrassment as from the effort of bending and, checking himself, added:

"Now I definitely know: it's warships for me... And then, you know yourself: if I joined the Merchant Navy and went to sea and got used to being in a cargo boat, got to like it, and then war broke out—well, there'd be nothing for it, you'd have to fight anyway, so you might as well train for it in advance... And it's better to fight at the sea than on land, isn't it?"

Alexei had fired his last broadside. But his father did not reply. His eyes again came to rest on a point between the ears of his pony, but now he was whistling softly, always a sign that he was restraining his irritation.

"H'm, I see," he said with a wry smile: "...Just like in the fairy-tale, son: they hid all the spinning-wheels in the palace and forbade all spinning throughout the whole kingdom but the princess found a spindle herself, pricked her finger—and the poor old King had to twiddle his thumbs for a hundred years...." He stopped with a sigh. "There's only one thing that surprises me: where did you get this interest

in war from? Did you pick it up in the town? Was it at school or with the Young Pioneers?"

Alexei felt hurt.

"What do you mean—picked up?" he asked sharply, sensing that a futile argument was about to start. "Anyway, the fascists will attack us—sooner or later. That's clear to everybody except you. War is inevitable."

"All right, let's say it is, damn it," Sergei Petrovich interrupted him sharply and resumed his whistling as he tugged at his beard. Then, calming down, he went on in a quiet reflective manner:

"But surely you understand that it's one thing to take up arms in a moment of danger when someone's at your throat and quite another thing to be a professional soldier. A captain, moreover. For that, son, you've got to be a very special sort of man. It's far from enough just to want to be one. If you want to be a captain you've got to answer the requirements, to have special traits of character, ability.... I can't see any of that in you. Remember the way you felt about the slaughter-house?"

"I remember," said Alexei, colouring up again. "But I was only a kid then..."

"That's the point, son. Thousands of kids take all that as a matter of course: the calf grows into a cow, it's killed and gets eaten—that's no tragedy. But it was a real shock to you. Why was that? You've got a love for everything alive inside you and it's got deeper roots in your nature than you think... You've had it from childhood, son. Remember the 'wonderful spark'? It'll come back to you with the years, but it'll be too late then. And then you'll feel you're one of the unlucky ones who have chosen the wrong path in life. I won't envy you when you find that out. It's an awful thing, my son, to have regrets about your own life..."

Sergitaletrovich shook his head, frowned and pursed his lips. Then he went on in a quiet, confiding tone:

"There was a time when I felt quite sure I had to be a doctor and nothing else. I put years into it—I studied, qual-

ified, then became a nuisance to everybody—including myself-until I realized it wasn't my calling at all. I'd no gift for it, no real bent for it, neither the courage nor the perseverance, I just treated people because I'd been taught to, but I didn't have the least interest in it.... When you do a job, my lad, you've got to do it with passion and conviction and the belief that it's the only thing for you. For years I ran in the wrong harness.... I was still pottering about as a doctor when you were born—a poor doctor, at that.... I didn't realize then that my real calling was stock-raising. I wanted to help people to live not by giving them poultices and mixtures I didn't know head or tail about but through raising good cattle.... It was only then that I understood what I was on this earth for-and I drew a breath as though I'd broken out of a prison, a prison I'd built myself. I was able to drop one sort of work and take up another which suited me, but you'll find that harder. You see, son, being a captain is like this: you have to stick to your guns all the days of your life. That's what you must think about before you decide your life.... I suppose you never gave that a thought, did you?"

Alexei said nothing. What could he say? Talk about his dreams again? But all those light, joyful words which had just flown so freely and happily from his tongue suddenly became leaden and tarnished; no power on earth could have made him continue talking to his father in this way about the Navy. He kept silent, looking ahead stubbornly. His father, apparently, understood what was happening, because he suddenly reached out a hand to him and gripped him affectionately by the elbow.

"I'm not trying to talk you out of it, by the way," he said in quite another tone. "Why should I? Nobody was ever convinced by another person's experience. We all now that. Men are made in such a way that they like to use their own heads to knock their walls down. If you've made up your mind that's your real calling in life, well, I'm not going to

argue. Decide as you think best.... And now let's have a bite of lunch while there's this chance of a bit of shade."

For the next three days Alexei was in fine fettle—everything had turned out unexpectedly easy: he hadn't had to argue, or persuade, or express his opinion. Yet the talk in the forest left him with a feeling of dissatisfaction. He felt as if he had put all his weight against a door which he thought was being propped up by a shoulder on the other side only to find it flying open to let him come bursting into an empty room where, instead of the foe he expected to meet, he had found only his own reflection in a mirror. And the talk in the forest and the ones that came after it always finished with Sergei Petrovich giving him full freedom of choice. That was the worst of all, because his father's question whether it was just the sea that attracted him had aroused in him a whole heap of second thoughts and doubts.

To reinforce his ideas about the Navy he shared his father's views with Vasya, leaving out, however, everything he called the "green light"; for to reveal to Vasya his vague dream about the ocean would have brought forth immediately some caustic phrase like him being "an unemployed Columbus."

As was to be expected, Vasya dealt with the matter in a typically straightforward way; Sergei Petrovich, he said, was simply a pigheaded old man (he was only a little over forty), who was afraid his son might lose his life: that was what lay behind all his theorizing. Well, you could forgive a vet talking about some special traits of character being necessary for a captain: that was only another manifestation of the biological theory of natural—er—election (Vasya meant to say "selection" but in his indignation mixed the words). However, it was dangerous to pay attention to such theories and if he were in Alexei's place he would decide the question efficiently, like a commander: he would break with his family at once, move for the rest of the summer to the frontier post and in the winter arrange to board at school so

as to avoid having his mind muddled by the conversation of his aunt whom Sergei Petrovich would, of course, prime suitably.

These extreme measures did not please Alexei at all, and, assuring Vasya that his father had really nothing against his plans but was only leaving him to decide for himself, he did not broach the subject of his doubts again. Their confabs in the "whale-boat" returned to considerations of the best way to join the Navy. The path was clear: the moment they were Komsomol members they would raise the question of being entered for the Naval College, before anyone else did it. And really the town Komsomol committee could be relied on to help them, for weren't they the most active enthusiasts for the Navy?

When they returned to the town the boys went to the Komsomol committee to find out everything there was to be known on the subject. And they received a promise that their names would go on the list, with a warning, however, that only boys with excellent marks at school would be accepted—and neither of them had ever had that distinction. It was also explained to them that putting their names on the list only gave them the right to sit for the entrance exams, and that generally six or seven boys—occasionally as many as ten—with excellent marks competed for each vacancy. And so Alexei and Vasya went hammer and tongs at their studies; the winter flew past unnoticed and the spring came and Alexei came home to the farm again for the summer.

During that winter Sergei Petrovich had worked out a new, carefully contrived course of action. He knew very well that if during this decisive summer—the last before Alexei took his finals—he did not succeed in making the boy change his mind, then Alexei would take the path he could not bear to think of without profound alarm about his son's fate. He hated the idea of Alexei choosing to be a professional naval officer. Several feelings were combined in that sense of protest—bitterness that his son did not understand him, did not, it seemed, want to understand him, fear that

Alexei's enthusiasm was an immature whim of youth which the boy would regret later, and, simply, a father's anxiety for the life of his son.

But it would only make things worse to try to talk the boy out of his decision, to argue, to protest. Sergei Petrovich remembered what he himself had been like at that age, and he realized that opposition could only add fuel to Alexei's desire and reinforce him in his decision. Therefore he set in motion another, more potent method of dissuasion.

## CHAPTER FOUR

In the middle of June the farm manager's car drove up from the station with an unusual visitor for a state farm in the Altai to receive—a tall, stoutish, middle-aged Merchant Navy man in a white tunic with four gold bands on the sleeves. This merry, loud-voiced man brought with him an odour of aromatic pipe tobacco and of the sea; he and all his possessions gave off the smell of tarred ropes, coal smoke, fresh paint and some elusive scent that was difficult to place but which at once carried Alexei back to the deck of the cruiser in Sevastopol. What surprised him was how this remarkable ship's smell could go on clinging to the visitor for so long, but next morning he discovered that it originated from an unusual kind of lotion with a tossing schooner on the label, which the visitor used liberally after shaving his firm rosy cheeks and craggy neck. He said he had bought it in some port, just where he could not recall.

The visitor's name was Pyotr Ilyich Yershov, and he was an old family friend, the master of an ocean-going merchant ship. Alexei had heard about him from stories his father told and from jokes that sometimes made his mother blush as they reminded her that there had been a time when she had been in agony of doubt whether to marry Sergei Reshetnikov or Pyotr Yershov. The reason for Captain Yershov's presence at the farm became clear during dinner:

crunching a piece of *pirog* with evident pleasure he told them he had received the command of the *Dezhnev* which was still being fitted out, and that it had occurred to him to use the opportunity of the overland journey from Vladivostok to Leningrad to drop in on friends and have a week's rest and some shooting in the steppe, far away from water in any form. He was really quite tired of water.

It goes without saying that young Alexei lost his heart at once to Pyotr Ilyich. Like most seafarers of his age, Yershov loved to spin a yarn, and did so well, for with thirty years' sailing over most of the Seven Seas he had plenty of memories to draw on. The unknown life of the toilers of the sea—the timber ships and the tankers, the cargo boats and the fast passenger liners—unfolded before Alexei's eyes with increasing clarity and enchantment. The dear, familiar picture of Sevastopol Bay with its blue-grey warships grew faint and remote as it was swallowed up in the fogs of the English Channel, or washed away by the tall billows of ocean storms, or screened by the palms of Africa or the skyscrapers of New York. During dinner Alexei drifted on the Arctic ice; at supper he fought storms in the Bay of Biscay; he fell asleep aboard a tanker crossing the Line on its way to Brazil; he awoke on some timber boat in Portsmouth harbour. He relived with extraordinary intensity everything he had ever read by Stevenson, Conrad, Staniukovich, Marlinsky, Jack London, Goncharov, Jules Verne and Captain Marryat. Everything in the world centred on Yershov with his roaring voice and his delightful tales.

Sergei Petrovich watched this suddenly aroused friendship with the gratified look of a research worker convinced that one of his experiments is proceeding according to plan. And by the benevolent way he sat listening at table to Yershov, even prompting him occasionally to tell new stories of his travels, Alexei guessed that the appearance of the skipper at the farm was no mere chance. His father's cunning ruse did not, however, offend Alexei in the least. On the contrary, in his heart of hearts he was even grateful to him for this turn of events. At last it had become quite clear (and this time incontestably so) who he had to be in life: a navigator, of course, and master of an ocean-going ship! And only on those rare occasions when Yershov went out walking with his father did Alexei, left alone with his consuming jealousy, remember Vasya Glukhov and their plans and dreams of the Navy, the Komsomol committee and the applications to the Frunze College.... But for those pricks of conscience, not to mention his vanity, he would long ago have told Yershov about his new decision and asked him how he could enter a merchant navy training school.

By a fortunate turn of events the necessity of making this admission never arose. Fate (or was it his father?) again met Alexei half-way.

A little while before Yershov left, Sergei Petrovich led the dinner conversation round to the question whether he expected to remain long in Leningrad. Yershov said yes, unfortunately he would have to spend the whole winter there. Abusing the ministry which necessitated his spending his time in a way so unbefitting his profession, he said he would, of course, have dodged a shore job had there not been something tempting in prospect. The point was that the Dezhnev was intended to ply between Pacific ports, but as the fascists were up to their monkey tricks in the Mediterranean, the chances were that if they had not been defeated in Spain by the spring she would sail to Vladivostok round the Cape instead of through the Suez Canal. Nowadays this route was not often taken and it would be plain silly to miss the opportunity. Whereupon Yershov went into details about the route—Portsmouth, Capetown, Madagascar, Singapore, Hong Kong. Then, suddenly, he looked at Alexei and asked him whether he would like to sail on the Dezhnev, almost round the world.

The unexpectedness of it made Alexei choke over his dumpling. He was struck dumb. Yershov burst out laughing.

"What are you gaping at me like that for? Nothing could be simpler.... When does school end?"

"In June," said Alexei, at last getting the dumpling down. "Good. The *Dezhnev* won't have finished her tests before then."

And they turned at once to making plans which seemed to be quite real.

The voyage of the *Dezhnev* to the Far East would take about two months. Alexei could study for the college entrance exams while afloat and would have the experience of a good 20,000 sea miles before starting his service in the Navy, which would not be a bad thing. He ought to realize, though, that there was no question of his being idle on board ship; if he came it wouldn't be as a passenger but, say, as a ship's boy: he'd be more useful that way, and it would be easier to arrange, too. . . .

The rest of the stay of this miraculous visitor passed in a whirl of happiness and anxiety. Dazed, half out of his senses, panting with happiness, Alexei dogged Yershov's heels, his eyes fixed on him devotedly as he asked him for the thousandth time whether he was joking or not. Yet how could he be joking? Everything had been talked over and discussed at various tête-à-têtes and then confirmed at a general family gathering: after taking the last paper in his school exams Alexei was to go straight to Leningrad and sign on as a member of the crew of the Dezhnev—on condition, however, that he left school with excellent marks (this clause was inserted by Sergei Petrovich who was afraid Alexei would pore whole evenings over a world atlas and forget about his studies).

During these discussions Alexei was careful to keep quiet about one essential circumstance: in calculating when the *Dezhnev* ought to reach Vladivostok so that he could get to Leningrad in time for the college entrance exams, everybody reckoned on the middle of August at the latest. However, he knew very well that the exams began considerably earlier and, besides, another twelve days had to be added

for the rail journey to Leningrad (something that, for some reason, everybody forgot). It meant, then, that he would manage to turn up for the exams only if the *Dezhnev* reached Vladivostok in mid-July at the latest, and that was quite out of the question. But about all that he preferred to say nothing, otherwise he would have had to confess before them all that he was no longer the least interested in going to the Naval College.

Alexei knew perfectly well that this fabulous trip and his going to the Naval College the following autumn were incompatible and that he would have to choose between one or the other. And he chose the *Dezhnev* and everything that involved: an ocean-going master's certificate in the distant future and, first of all, a merchant navy training school. Whether that would be in Leningrad or Vladivostok, immediately after leaving the *Dezhnev* or a year later, after taking an exam or by being sent there from the ship—these were matters to be discussed with Pyotr Ilyich without delay. But that would mean admitting that he had changed his mind.

What was he going to say about it? After all, he couldn't plunge into the subject like this: "Pyotr Ilyich, apparently I don't want to go on a warship after all. I want to join the Merchant Navy...." Yershov would burst out laughing and tease him: "Well, you are a shuttlecock. Making all that fuss, upsetting your dad and suddenly going full speed astern."

So he put off the conversation until a more suitable occasion. Finally, he decided the best of all would be to have a talk with Yershov in the car when he was being driven to the station: a convenient moment would be sure to crop up during the six or seven hours' journey. Accordingly, he asked to be allowed to see their visitor off. Yershov must have sensed his wish to have a private talk because when he had taken his leave of everybody and gone to the car, he put his suitcase up beside the driver and sat behind with Alexei who was touched by this mark of attention.

The afternoon was coming to an end and it was cooler when they drove out of the copses of the foothills and reached the main road which crossed the steppe in a broad dusty ribbon marked with a paling of telegraph poles. The old highway, which dated from posting days, had been deeply rutted by lorries. Bouncing and bumping desperately, the light car swung from side to side in search of a smoother track. There could be no question of holding a heart-to-heart conversation. Alexei took a decision and leant forward to the driver.

"Let's go over Ak-Tash, Fedya. You'll tear our guts out on this road...."

"What about the chee?" objected Fedya.

"Well, what about it? There's not much of it.... Turn off the road. Look, there's a turning."

The car slid from the highway on to a by-road that was scarcely visible in the low grass; here the going was smoother and faster, but all the same the conversation lagged. For the first half hour it jumped from one topic to another and, try as he might, Alexei could not steer it his way; then it broke down altogether. The track ran into deep ruts, the car slowed to a crawl and threw up so much dust that Yershov covered his mouth with a handkerchief. The dust drifted along with the car, relentlessly blotting out the steppe and the sky with a thick yellowish-grey mist. Through it they could barely distinguish dense groves of tall, hard, reed-like grass pressing in close to the narrow road.

This was the chee—the enemy of steppe roads.

These steppe roads are not laid: they are simply rolled out by the wheels of vehicles until they become flat grey ribbons. There is no variety of grass that can stand up to the pressure of the wheels, but *chee*, which grows in clumps almost like bushes, with strong long roots going wep down, avenges its own death by forming high hillocks—and the more you drive over them the deeper become the ruts between them.

Sneezing and coughing from the dust Alexei explained all this to Yershov. He sounded apologetic.

"Hey, what's the idea?" Yershov asked in a muffled voice through his handkerchief. "The main road was bad enough but this is much worse."

"It won't last long, only six kilometres."

"Thank you," mumbled Yershov. "A fine helmsman you'd make."

"But it really is the best way," said Alexei with conviction. "It's better to put up with this now than get shaken up on the road. The road's all broken up, you can't drive fast, but here, you'll see, we'll go like the wind. You'll be surprised."

And, sure enough, soon the car broke clear of the *chee* and speeded westward along a smooth natural road that crossed the steppe practically without a turn. Yershov took off his cap and, with a sigh of relief, held his face against the breeze made by their speed.

"Well, well, you were right," he said, taking breath and looking around him with satisfaction. "So there's your steppe. As broad as the sea."

Now that they were leaving the dust behind them in a long whirling tail, they could see the vast, monotonous steppe stretching around them in all its magnitude. In every direction it lay, smooth, sometimes yellow, sometimes green. There were no ragged woods or looming mountains to screen the sky; the steppe met the horizon in a perfectly straight line, exactly like the horizon at sea. The sun hung over it quite low; every ridge cast a long shadow betraying the fact that the steppe which during the day looks as flat as a billiard table is, in reality, composed of smooth low escarpments running evenly into each other like frozen waves. The car ran up and down these ridges so naturally that the wavellers noticed the inclines only because one minute they were plunging out of the sunshine into shadow and the next they were back again in the soft evening light.

Yershov smiled.

"Just like ocean rollers.... You'll see yourself how interesting it is: looks as calm as a mirror, but when you meet another ship it'll be lying down below you like at the foot of a mountain. Can't believe your eyes. Incredible how high the rollers have lifted you...."

That broad familiar dream rose in Alexei with an irresistible force like the mighty heaving waves Yershov was describing. And with it he felt a sweet ache in his heart at the thought that his dream was near fulfilment. Every image connected with the ocean jostled in his mind and he found he could talk of them as something attainable. Alexei smiled happily at the thought.

"I've been arguing with Vasya," he said vivaciously. "Is it true you can see the green light only in the ocean? Where did you see it, for instance?"

"Me, I've never seen it."

"Really!" Alexei was shocked. "But you've sailed so far. D'you mean to say...."

Yershov smiled.

"That green light of yours is like the sea serpent; everybody tells his own story about it but nobody knows what it's really like. So I don't know whether I've seen it or not."

"What did you see, then?"

"I saw a green speck of light. Pretty often, too. But I reckon I'm not fated to see the real thing. Now, there is a seafarer, an ocean-going master called Vasenka Krasniukov—he's sixty but he's still known as Vasenka. He sees that green light every time he goes to sea. Sees it properly, too. He says it strikes straight up out of the water, narrow like a searchlight beam but only lasting a second. If you happen to be blinking that second you miss it altogether. Seems everybody on deck must be blinking just at that moment because it always happens he's the only one to see it. But for the sake of science he always makes an extry in the log about it, with the position and the barograph reading. As a matter of fact, I did have an opportunity of seeing it, but that was at dawn, not sunset. I didn't wake up in time,

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though. Our sailors saw it and I don't think they were lying. But it was lost to science, because it happened in 1910 on a schooner that belonged to an Odessa Greek called Postopoli, and, of course, it didn't enter anybody's mind to record it...."

"And I once saw a very interesting thing," broke in Fedya the driver. "I was driving from Zaisan. Just at sunset. The sky was all covered with clouds, but there was one place...."

"Shut up, Fedya," said Alexei. "What did they see, Pyotr

Ilyich?"

"It was in the Gulf of Suez—our Greek had undertaken to bring seven Kazan merchants to Mecca on a pilgrimage. I'd just turned in after my watch but the deck hands were up—it'd gone six. Just then the sun began to rise—it comes up behind Mount Sinai—they were all gaping at it: the sky had turned green, the water too, and everything on deck. Green as corpse. They say it lasted a second or two, no more, then it went, and the sun rose. And there was I asleep. But if the legend says that only lucky ones see the green light, then this turned out just the opposite: I'm still afloat, but the Greek and all his crew went down that very autumn. And where, d'you think? In Novorossiisk Bay, close to shore—the bora tore the schooner from her moorings and she broke up on the rocks. And I'd been paid off only a week before. That's all your legend's worth. . . ."

"Signs and portents are a remnant of the past," said Fedya with authority. "Take cats. Some drivers will stop the car and turn around rather than cross a cat's trail.

But I...."

"Fedya!" Alexei sounded threatening. "Let a man talk. What a terrible fellow you are. But you mentioned a green

point, Pyotr Ilyich. How did you come to see that?"

"Oh, that happened often. You can see that wherever you like, you don't have to be in the ocean to see that. I've seen it in the Baltic and in the Black Sea. If the horizon's clear and the sun goes straight into the water, then you can see it. The moment the top edge starts to disappear you'll see

it. Bright as anything and a pure, pure green. As if you were looking at a strong light through an emerald. It holds for a second at the most, and goes out. Sometimes you see it very bright, other times it's paler..."

"I won't miss a single sunset when I go to sea," said Alexei firmly. "One day I'll catch the real green light, you'll see."

"Everybody has his own dream," said Fedya. "Mine's to hit a bird with the car. I'm always dreaming of doing it, but I never do. Petrov—him at the frontier post—he got a golden eagle last autumn."

The engine suddenly back-fired noisily and stalled.

"Full of dust. Damn that chee," grumbled Fedya as he opened the door. "I'll have to take the carburettor down."

Yershov opened the door and struggled out on to the grass.

"That's all right, we'll stretch ourselves.... Let's walk ahead," he said to Alexei.

Everything was turning out in the best way possible: of course, it had been difficult to talk seriously in the presence of that chatterbox Fedya.... However, once out of the car, with nothing to disturb him, Alexei remained silent. Yershov, too, had nothing to say as he walked on slowly filling his pipe; everything around was so quiet that the rustle of the grass underfoot or the occasional crackle of the burrs sounded incongruously loud. Alexei found himself wanting to walk on tip-toe.

A wonderful calm reigned over the steppe that evening. The empty cloudless sky, drained of all weight by the heat of the long day, remained bright blue at the zenith, but nearer to the sunset everything was growing pale, passing through several tones of yellow to a zone of queer colour-lessness. It seemed as if the sun were bleaching the colours out of everything all around it, although its beam 3 had lost all their strength and did not even warm the face. The sultry air was quite motionless and the faint scent of summer-dried herbs rose bitter and sad from the hot earth.

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The combination of this scent, the setting sun and the slow tread of their feet as they walked silently on gave Alexei an oppressive feeling of melancholy, presaging separation. No longer was he thinking about the ocean or the *Dezhnev* or of his fabulous voyage halfway round the world or even of the fact that the time had come for a talk with Yershov that would settle his future. He walked on with downcast eyes watching the dry, yellowed, stiffened grass divide as Yershov strode through it, and it seemed to him that those feet would disappear somewhere ahead and that behind them the tall grass would close, leaving him alone, quite alone in this huge, empty, boundless steppe without the least idea where to go, just as he was without any idea which way to go in life—in that life that spread huge and boundless on all sides.

He had never felt the sharp pang of separation so heavily before. Many were the autumns when he had parted from his father and mother; he had missed them—longed for them, even—but this sensation of being alone in life had never come to him before. Suddenly confronted with it he felt somewhat bewildered. It was so unexpected, frightening, it filled him with such gloomy forebodings that he tried to console himself. Why, nothing particular was happening: Pyotr Ilyich would leave, but there'd be his mother and father whom he loved and got on well with; there was Vasya Glukhov and other school friends.... But here the thought struck him hard that he could not admit to any of these people what he was ready to tell Yershov now and that none of them could answer him as Yershov was certainly going to answer him.... With Yershov's departure something he could turn to for succour, for relief was going out of his life. Without him life was going to be unbearably difficult. Yershov would go, he would remain alone. Absolutely alog. And that's a moment when a fellow has to start taking life seriously....

Life.... But what was he going to be?... Perhaps this new idea about going to the merchant navy school was all

nonsense, just a passing whim arising from his crazy, avid desire not to miss the chance of sailing the Seven Seas. Didn't his heart still ache when he thought about the warships of Sevastopol, about their blue-grey armour-plating and the well-proportioned gun-barrels? Oh yes, it did. Perhaps fate itself had arranged this test to discover whether he was capable of being steadfast and sincere in his decision, of captaining a warship, and being a man of iron will who knew how to hold to one course, while he.... Where was his will-power? He was nearing sixteen but had not made up his mind about anything yet. All the time he was waiting for someone or other to give him suggestions, to help him, to take him by the hand and lead him.... Surely Pushkin at sixteen must have known very well what to do. . . . Admirals Nakhimov and Makarov too.... And at that age Chkalov had made up his mind firmly to become an airman though it seemed impossible. But there was no need to look so far. Vasya Glukhov had chosen his path and was keeping to it staunchly.... But he was like a limp rag, neither one thing nor another: one day for the college, the next for the merchant navy school....

"Pyotr Ilyich," he said, to his own surprise, "when you were sixteen what did you want to be?"

Yershov, who was busy lighting his pipe, looked at Alexei out of the corner of his eye, his left brow cocked. And in the way he looked at him—tenderly and a little ironically—and in the half-smile on the lips gripping the pipe-stem, there was something that made Alexei feel a little shy. Yershov plainly realized what was up.

The pipe was lit at last. Yershov took it from his mouth. "A deacon," he replied, extinguishing the match with a puff of smoke.

"Please, now..." said Alexei in a hurt tone. "I'm serious...."

"So am I. My father was a sexton and he dreamed of his son becoming a deacon."

"But what about you?"

"Me?" Yershov smiled. "When I was sixteen it was 1907. Things then weren't like what they are now. A boy couldn't dream of choosing for himself. You went where life drove you. My father begged the archdeacon to put me down for a scholarship, and sent me to a seminary. There's only one way from there..."

A gleam of understanding came into Alexei's eyes.

"You mean you ran away."

"Ran away?"

"Yes. From the seminary, ran away to sea."

"You chump!" said Yershov. "How could I run away? My father was a sick man—he fell through a hole in the ice at a ceremony of 'blessing the waters' and never got over it. Consumption, I suppose—every spring he nearly died. There were six of us children. All girls except me. They only lived for the day when I could start keeping the family. No chance of running away from that, my lad. And as for the sea I wasn't thinking about that anyway."

"So how did you become a sailor?"

"I'm telling you. Life drove me to it. I came home for the holidays—we lived in a village near Kherson, the living was a beggarly one, just kept us on bread and kvass-and father was ill in bed again. At seventeen I was a big, strong fellow—you should have seen the shoulders on me so I got taken on at the mill lifting sacks, just to help eke things out. Father was never up again, he died. I was real scared: three more years to run at the seminary; why, before I'd be through there the whole family would starve to death. I thought and thought and the workers at the mill said: 'What's the sense of a great bullock of a man like you bending your back for next to nothing? You be off to Odessa, you'll pick up four times the wage there. And the main thing is you'll get winter work too. In the port.' So I went. I we on my own at first—that was bad—then I was taken into a good gang on account of my strength. Came autumn and I said good-bye to the seminary: I was earning enough to keep me in grub and to send something home besides. In the spring the skipper of the *Tsaritsa*—a schooner she was—signed me on as a seaman, again for my broad shoulders. He wasn't much short of seven feet himself and he liked strong fellows; sails don't like 'em skinny, he'd say. So that's how I began my seafaring: Odessa-Jaffa, Jaffa-Odessa; we'd ship oranges from there and take out what the good Lord sent us. I stayed on the *Tsaritsa* eighteen months and so I got used to the sea. From ship to ship, from sea to sea, there's my life for you."

Alexei sighed.

"So things just turned out by themselves with you....
Trouble is when you've got to decide yourself...."

"But what's there for you to decide?" Yershov asked calmly. "You've done that—for the rest of your life. You've even convinced your father—he told me what an argument you had about it. Good lad, looks you've got a will of your own..."

"Will of my own!" said Alexei with a wry smile. "If you want to know, Pyotr Ilyich, I.... Anyway, it's arranged itself.... But you understand everything very well."

"I don't understand anything," said Yershov, still calm. "What don't you understand?" exclaimed Alexei in despair. "Don't you see that I... that I'm.... What it comes to is, I'm a traitor, that's what I am. A real traitor: I've betrayed my comrades, my school, the warships, myself, my oath...."

There were tears in his voice and Yershov, glancing at the boy's pale face, wanted to say something to calm him, but Alexei went on talking in an excited, confused, halting manner—not at all the way he had planned to conduct this serious man-to-man talk. He told Yershov everything he had tried to console himself with: of course, the town Komsomol committee would understand that it wasn't necessary for every sailor to go into the Navy, while in school he would simply be envied and told he was the luckiest chap in the world... Even Vasya Glukhov, about whom Alexei worried most—well, he'd be furious at first and curse him

roundly, but then he'd think it over and say that Alexei's father had fixed things fine—he'd played a trump card, for only a complete idiot would let such a trip go by.... So it looked as if everything would turn out splendidly. But then why did he have the feeling that he'd taken a wrong step?...

As a matter of fact, Alexei was fully aware of what it was that was pricking his conscience. He could have explained it in one word, but that word would have been out of place in this heart-to-heart talk. It sounded too official, a bit bookish and pompous, quite unsuitable for the occasion; besides, to use it in connection with oneself was awkward, though he could find no other way of expressing his thoughts.

The word was "duty."

The moment it entered their conversation, Yershov cast Alexei a look of serious attention as if on the lips of this youth, only just out of his boyhood, the austere, authoritative word had acquired an unexpectedly new significance. And even later, while listening to Alexei, he looked at him occasionally as if wanting to make sure that he had not misheard him.

As a matter of fact, Alexei did not say anything special. He explained how two years before, he and Vasya had made a common vow to become naval officers ("like Herzen and Ogarev," he added with a smile). Maybe there had been an element of childishness in it in those days but with the lapse of time he had come to realize more clearly and to feel more keenly the growing danger of war. That is where his hesitations began: deep in his heart he dreamed about the Merchant Navy which enticed him by its prospect of ocean voyages, but his idea about the inevitability of war and his sense of duty urged him to train for service in a warship. At last the ay came when a millstone seemed to have been lifted from his neck: that was when his first acquaintance with the cruiser at Sevastopol overwhelmed his vague but tempting dream of the ocean. For almost a year his mind

had been at rest; everything went smoothly until the Dezhnev had got everything mixed up again.

He realized, of course, that it was not at all a question of breaking that boyhood pledge because of the Dezhnev. Everything was much more serious and important: surely, in giving up the idea of becoming a naval officer he was deviating from his duty as a Komsomol member and a Soviet citizen—which was to be in the front rank of the defenders of his country and of the Revolution. Had he not felt the inevitable nearness of a war against fascism (as for some reason many, including his father, did not), or had he not started from childhood training himself for a life in the fighting service, well, then there might be some justification in saying that not everyone could be a professional naval officer and that some had to go into the merchant service. But, since he saw the danger of war and understood how close it was, going into the Merchant Navy would be a plain breach of duty.

That was why, he supposed, he felt so uneasy, though, to tell the truth, the Dezhnev, of course, and everything connected with it, was much more what he liked, much more what he needed, than the cruiser, about which he would have clean forgotten if it weren't for the way Vasya kept nagging. But then everything about Vasya was so clearcut, commander-like, full of "will-power," and that had a terrific effect on people. If he'd been like Vasya he probably wouldn't have had a moment's worry: he'd have made up his mind once and for all. He felt so rotten, so upset about the whole thing, he was on the verge of giving up the Dezhnev.... And perhaps that was what he really ought to do to get everything on the right lines again, but he hadn't the strength or the firmness of will to do that.... So it all came back to the same thing: he was neither one thing nor the other.... Anyway, his father did wrong to make all these arrangements-sending for Yershov and thinking up this Dezhnev business. He'd probably wanted to help him decide, to shove him along a bit, but the trouble was his father simply couldn't understand one very important thing: he kept on thinking that this idea of Alexei's about the Navy was a whim, a bit of childish stubbornness; in fact it was a necessity, a responsibility, a duty... He hadn't understood that himself very well at first and it was really this Dezhnev business that helped to make things clear. But as it turned out the Dezhnev hadn't had anything like the effect his father had expected. Never mind, though, that was the way things should be: a man has to fight for his ideas honestly, he has to prove and convince others that he's right... But that Dezhnev business, why, it was simply swinish; a man ought to be sent off the field for a foul like that.

For the first time during the conversation Yershov smiled.

"Swinish, you call it?... No, just tactics. Nothing to do with your father, anyway. I palmed off the *Dezhnev* on you."

Alexei came to an abrupt halt.

"You did?"

"Yes, it was me. We'd agreed to a bit of propaganda. That's why I came. Then I got to know you better. I saw you were a decent young fellow, and asked myself why we ought to lose a good young sailor. So I made up my mind to take you on that trip, and then when we were on the ocean you'd realize what you were born for...."

The frankness with which Yershov showed his hand bowled Alexei over. He felt a warm lump rise in his throat. What a wonderful man he was, this Pyotr Ilyich, how completely he put a fellow at his ease.

"So don't get mad with your dad," Yershov went on, drawing on his pipe. He smiled kindly. "To begin with, he's a clever man, and secondly, he's very fond of you. What's his aim? To get you to understand clearly what you really want to do in life. And, what's more, he's right. Judge for yourself: can you really call yourself grown up if you see a cruiser and say 'I'm going to serve in the Navy' and then

when you're shown the *Dezhnev* you turn a somersault and say 'I'll join the Merchant Navy'?"

"You needn't rag me, Pyotr Ilyich," Alexei said entreat-

ingly. "I know I'm a ditherer."

"Oh no, you're not, son, you've got what's called a highly susceptible nature. A ditherer is a man lacking in will-power, one who cannot act, but look at the way you're tacking! Only, as I see it, you're not on your course yet. If you feel something gnawing at you it means you're not fully convinced there's absolutely no other course. And in that case, what's your decision worth?"

"But how on earth am I to tell whether I got conviction or not?" asked Alexei in despair. "You should have seen the way I was convinced after Sevastopol."

Yershov raised an assuring hand.

"Don't worry. You'll know all right when it comes. And you won't have anything gnawing at your conscience, or any doubt to set at rest. You'll find the answer to every one of your questions, and if you don't, then you'll at least *feel* that things can't be otherwise, though you mayn't be able to explain it to yourself just yet. . . . Did you feel that way at Sevastopol?"

"No, I didn't," Alexei admitted truthfully.

"That's how it is. Besides, when a man's convinced, he simply acts and doesn't dither. The one who hesitates is the one who hasn't found conviction yet. That's you: as long as you go on wondering whether you should do this or that, it means the decision hasn't matured in you yet, it means you're not convinced about anything yet. Well, there's no hurry. It'll come."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Well, that's also a decision," smiled Pyotr Ilyich. "It's known as 'refusal to act.' But you're no ditherer, as I've said before, and you'll certainly find your decision. If you don't discover it for yourself life will give you a hand. That's why I palmed off the *Dezhnev* on you, you'll sail in her, have a look round, and make up your mind...."

"It's the making up of my mind that's the trouble, Pyotr Ilyich," sighed Alexei. "Once I'm in the *Dezhnev* it's goodbye to the battleships."

"Why?"

Alexei realized that he was talking about something he did not wish to discuss at all.

"Well, once it's happened," he replied evasively.

Yershov shrugged.

"Another hasty decision. That's exactly why you're being offered the *Dezhnev*, so you can work it all out for yourself."

"No, Pyotr Ilyich. It's not there I've got to work it out, but here. Once I'm aboard the *Dezhnev* I'll never go to a warship."

"So that's what's wrong. But what do you think the *Dezhnev* is going to be—a monastery? Shave your head and that's the end of everything, eh?"

"Not quite, but something like that," said Alexei with a forced smile. "Anyhow, I'll have to decide now, not when I'm aboard ship...."

"I don't see why. Come on, out with it."

"But I've told you: once on the *Dezhnev* it's for life, not just for a summer..."

"The same old song!" Yershov snorted. "Who's going to force you to stay on her? If you feel it doesn't suit you or if your conscience pricks you, then you'll be perfectly free to go to the Frunze College. No 'for life' about it."

Alexei dropped his eyes and slowed his pace; he wanted to keep a little behind Yershov so that his confusion and embarrassment would not be noticed. He found it very hard to reply.

The trouble was he had his own secret plans. Having tumbled to the fact fairly quickly that the voyage on the Dezhnev was a trap, he had decided to use his father's ruse for his own ends. For that he had to pretend he had not noticed anything, to agree to "go to sea for the summer," and then, as if it was a surprise to him, discover the fact that it was impossible to take the exams in Leningrad and

—well, as that was the case—willy-nilly train for the Merchant Navy in Vladivostok. . . . Then it would have looked as if he had not chosen the Merchant Navy himself but had been forced into it by dint of circumstances. In other words, he was trying to do what very many people do: dodge the necessity of deciding a serious question for himself and shove the decision on to others. That was the reason for his silence; he did not know how to answer as he would have either to reveal his secret, dishonourable intentions or to tell a lie.

He was on the point of saying something to the effect that he must have been wrong and Pyotr Ilyich right—in short, to change the subject and lead the conversation further from that dangerous theme. But glancing down he noticed once more how the stiff grass that Yershov's legs brushed aside closed again behind him, and again his heart was seized by a sad, ominous feeling that those footprints were disappearing and that he was being left alone and that there would be no possibility of continuing their conversation or of resuming it for a whole year. And he felt unutterably ashamed to have been thinking of spoiling those last precious minutes with a lie or a deception. . . With anybody else, yes, but not with Pyotr Ilyich.

Alexei took a long stride and overtook Yershov.

"Pyotr Ilyich," he said, looking him straight in the eyes. "How will I be able to leave the *Dezhnev* after a cruise like that?" There was despair in his voice. "I've never seen the ocean, I've never sailed a single sea-mile, yet I've already stopped thinking about the cruiser. What will it be like there? All right, suppose, when I'm on the *Dezhnev*, I decide after all that I ought to go to the Frunze College. Well, I'm not a child, Pyotr Ilyich, and I know very well that I'm bound to be late for the entrance exams. That's a fact, isn't it? We'd not get back before September. That means I'd lose a year. And what would I do in that year? Sit at home? Or sign on again on the *Dezhnev*? Why should I do that once I'd plumped for the Navy? Just to have a bit of

fun to fill in time? No, Pyotr Ilyich, I'm right: once aboard the *Dezhnev* it's for life. Of course, you know that yourself.... So I really have made up my mind, honest I have: I'll go into the Merchant Navy—and I'm awfully glad I've decided that way; everything's all right. Only there's that something inside which holds me back, won't let me go. No, I'm wrong to call it something. I've told you what it is, it's a sense of duty.... And it's so hard for me, Pyotr Ilyich, so hard, and nobody can help me, nobody except myself.... And what can I do?"

He dropped his hands and fell silent. Yershov kept quiet, too, as he relit his pipe. Then he began to talk gravely, casting an occasional look at Alexei who was walking beside him with his eyes again on the ground.

"Duty, that's the word you used. Well, let's try and get things sorted out. Duty—that's something a man ought to do; public morality or his own conscience obliges him to do it. Military duty—now, that's the obligation on a citizen to defend his society, his country, at the cost of his life maybe, with a weapon in his hands. Our Constitution says it's a sacred obligation. You're not evading that sacred obligation in any way at all if you join the Merchant Navy. You know very well that you'll be taught what's necessary there and you'll become a naval reserve officer; and if there's a war, and it's necessary, they'll shove you on the bridge of a warship. So you won't be betraying your military duty in any way. But of course you realize that yourself, and what you're talking about, obviously, is quite another kind of duty. You don't mean your duty as a Soviet citizen but your own private duty which you feel obliged to fulfil not by public morality but by your own understanding of the historical course of events. That's right, isn't it?"

"Yes," Alexei nodded.

"Now less try to work out just what it is you consider your duty obliges you to do. As I understand, you see very clearly that a war with the fascists is inevitable. You even think you see that clearer than others. They don't realize

it's coming, you say, so it's all right for them to go on peacefully building, or doing their scientific research, or teaching children, or even being artists. But you know what's coming to all those people and to their work and you can't build or teach, or sail the ocean in a merchant ship, because you're in the power of a clear, honest, manly idea: you've got to be the one who's going to defend those people and their peaceful work. Well, if that's so, then you've got to study the art of defensive warfare. And that, like any other art, is a life's study. So it follows that you've got to have a military education and become a captain; in other words, to dedicate all your life to that important, noble cause. That's what you consider to be the duty you've got to fulfil, the duty you'll be betraying if you go into the Merchant Navy. Isn't that so?"

"Yes," said Alexei with another nod. He was impatient to hear what was coming next. He felt that as Yershov had sorted out his thoughts so wonderfully he must surely know some easy way out. He went so far as to raise his eyes as if his look could prompt Yershov to resume.

But Yershov said abruptly:

"Well, if that's how it is, then you're quite right: nobody can help you but yourself." So keen was Alexei's disappointment that it brought a smile to Yershov's face. But when he resumed he spoke seriously again:

"How could it be otherwise? You were the one who made that duty yours so it's up to you to deal with it. Look here, if during the time you're in the *Dezhnev* you find that there's another duty for you in life, one that is just as fine and lofty, and if it takes the place of this one, you feel loyal to now, then that'll be the end of all these misgivings of yours. Otherwise, you'll go on worrying about it and there'll be nothing to be done, whether you try to convince yourself or whether someone else will say: 'Yç'ı stick to this ship and forget about the Navy.' It'd be just the same as not thinking about the polar bear."

"What bear?" asked the bewildered Alexei, who was deep

in his own thoughts. The ball had been passed back to him, it seemed; not even Yershov could help him.

"Once there was a quack doctor treating a peasant for a rupture. Squat on your heels in a corner, he said, shut your eves and stay like that for exactly one hour. Then you'll be all right. Only, God preserve you, don't think of a polar bear, otherwise you'll spoil the whole cure. So that peasant thought for a whole hour how he could stop himself thinking about that polar bear. Now, if you want to be cured you'll have to go about it just the opposite way: you'll have to think about your polar bear as much as you can. You'll have plenty of time for that on board the Dezhnev. You never know, maybe you'll suddenly find out that sailing the ocean is not such a great temptation that you want to sacrifice your duty for it. Besides, you'll see the old world for yourself—that's something you've not taken a sniff at yet, and that'll be pretty good for your political education. Maybe it'll add something to that idea of yours about war being inevitable—it may strengthen your conviction, make you feel certain you're right and that you ought to be training for defence seriously instead of gallivanting about the high seas.... Maybe out there you'll make up your mind once and for all. True, it'll cost you a year. But, first, that's not really a loss, for you'll be acquiring experience of sailing and that's useful to a future naval officer too. And secondly, it's a worth-while job in itself: it'll take you a year longer to become an officer but you'll be a real one then, for you'll be quite certain it's the only thing for you in life. So that's how it is, my lad: as it's a question of your whole life, let's be serious and not rush to decide it now but in good time, not blindly but with your eyes wide open.... Well, it looks as if our car's stuck for good, and now the sun's beginning to set."

Yershov copped and turned to look back at the car. They had walked a good distance ahead but they could see that Fedya had stopped fiddling with the engine and was on his back under the chassis.

"That's what your *chee* has done for us. Looks as though I'm going to miss my train," Yershov said shaking his head reproachfully. "All the same, we wouldn't have been able to talk like this in the car. . . . Well, why don't you say something? You don't agree, eh?"

"Yes, I suppose I do," replied Alexei thoughtfully. "What

you say seems to be right...."

"I don't notice much enthusiasm," Yershov smiled and, laying an arm round Alexei's shoulders, gave him a friendly hug. "What a deep fellow you are. Stop tormenting yourself with all that betrayal business; you're a long way from being a quitter. And get this simple idea into your head: you can't turn down the *Dezhnev*. It won't do you or the Navy any good. You'd ruin your life and it would cost the Navy an officer. However much you boasted afterwards about having sacrificed such a wonderful trip for an ideal you'd be secretly reproaching yourself, and that would mean you'd not have your heart in your work. Let's go on a bit. He'll catch us up. . . ."

They walked slowly on along the firm earth road. The sun, which was now a huge crimson ball, had already laid its lower edge against the horizon and was beginning to flatten; above it the sky was gradually becoming suffused by deepening shades of pink and yellow; and near the sun a tiny round cloud appeared from nowhere and became glittering, molten gold.

Looking distractedly at the sky Alexei walked silently on, trying to put his thoughts in order. Strange to say, the conversation had calmed him, though it had deprived him of his ruse; his position was simplified and now he really had to make up his mind for himself, honestly, without relying on others. A surprisingly joyous feeling of relief rose in him, a feeling that, he realized, could never have come to him unless Yershov had appeared in his life.

Yershov, who for some time had also been walking with-

out saying a word, said apologetically:

"As for the Dezhnev I really think I was wrong to do

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what I did. You see, I thought it was something quite simple and ordinary: here's a lad who's crazy about guns, I said to myself; all I have to do is to give him a chance to sail the Seven Seas and the matter's all settled. I never imagined you'd taken the cruiser so much to heart. Maybe I've done wrong to sow doubts in your mind. Perhaps I oughtn't to have meddled in your life. You must excuse me. To tell the truth, maybe this *Dezhnev* business is really a swinish trick...."

Yershov's admission was so straightforward, and friendly that Alexei felt his heart falter.

"Pyotr Ilyich," he said, looking at Yershov with eyes that glistened with emotion, and making a great effort to keep his feelings in check and to speak calmly. "Pyotr Ilyich, you've no idea how right everything's turned out.... Absolutely right. Of course I'll sail on the *Dezhnev*. And there I'll decide what way to go in life...."

He had meant to say "what to do in life" but now his tongue was running away with him. The chance expression pleased him, however, and he repeated it deliberately:

"What's the point of making up one's mind now, all at once, about 'what way to go'? It's not a thing one can do by guessing. If it hadn't been for you I'd never have understood that.... That's why I'm so very grateful to you... for your coming here and for everything you've done."

"That's good, then," said Yershov with a smile. "There was I thinking I'd spoiled everything for you. Well, let's have a look for that green light out here in the steppe."

Alexei laughed. They stopped and watched the sunset. The crimson top of the sun slipped quickly below the edge of the steppe without any change of colour.

"That's the first observation, remember that," said Yershov challengingly. "When you see that light send me a telegram: Green light spotted at 542nd observation. That'll be your contribution to science."

They heard the strident hooting of the car behind them and swung round.

"What held you up?" Alexei grumbled when Fedya drew up beside them. "Shouldn't take more than a minute to blow through the carburettor...."

"Dropped a bolt," said Fedya glumly. "Fell in the grass. Had to crawl on my belly all over the steppe until I found it. There's your minute for you.... Good thing I found it. Last year...."

"Oh, come on, let's get going. Step on it. Pyotr Ilyich is worried he'll miss the train..."

"We'll be there in time," replied Fedya and before they had settled in their seats had the car in gear. It leaped forward through the darkening steppe at a speed that made its passengers hold their breath.

The first three weeks after Yershov's departure found Alexei in a mood of remarkable calm. True, at first he was always afraid that the joyful confidence that had come to him out there in the steppe would desert him. But luckily this unusual state of mind did not pass; on the contrary, it grew stronger every day and became habitual. Soon he noticed that it renewed itself every time he thought about his talk with Yershov. At those moments his heart was flooded with a warm feeling and in his mind rose a somewhat vague, but moving, grateful and, in a strange way, smiling thought—how well everything was working out and how right it was that there existed a captain of ocean-going liners called Pyotr Ilyich Yershov. And before he had completed his thought that feeling of joyful calm and self-confidence possessed him more powerfully than ever.

Now Alexei could look into the future without alarm or anxiety. Now everything was simple, everything was possible, provided he had Yershov beside him to answer his questions, ironically, perhaps, but always reasonably and, therefore, helpfully. And then the life that awaited him, a life so complicated, so full of demands difficult to meet, so puzzling, would become simple and clear, and there would be no doubts, no hesitations.

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Alexei told his parents nething about all this, or about his talk with Yershov and the understanding they had come to. Something prevented him from being frank with them: it may have been that feeling which sometimes prevents a man from talking about certain spiritual impulses even to his nearest and dearest; it may have been superstition or fear that his precious new feeling would fly away the moment he gave it voice; or it may have been simply a fit of boyish jealousy that made him want to keep his wonderful relationship with Yershov to himself. Anyway, nobody at home even suspected that he had decided to banish from his mind all thoughts of becoming a naval officer.

He was no less reticent on the subject when he met Vasya Glukhov ten days later. Not only did he keep quiet about the *Dezhnev*—Yershov had advised him on parting to keep it a secret until he had made arrangements for him to be signed on as a ship's boy—he only mentioned quite casually the unusual visitor who had been staying with them. Altogether, his meeting with Vasya, the first of the summer, turned out to be a bit tame. As usual, they at once made a trip in the "whale-boat," but returned the same evening: all the fun had gone out of the game, partly because they were both older, partly because Vasya felt Alexei was withholding something from him, and also because Alexei found it hard to keep his promise to Yershov.

So Alexei felt relieved to mount his bicycle next morning and ride home, taking with him, incidentally, his most valuable booty to that date: a world atlas that had just reached Vasya's father. Before he had time to do more than turn over the pages Alexei begged to be allowed to borrow it for a week, with the fib that he was preparing a lecture for the naval circle in the autumn on the strategic bases of imperialist navies. The atlas was the size of a newspaper page and the found it quite impossible to fix it to the luggage rack or to the frame of the bicycle. He had decided to carry it under his arm the whole way, but Vasya suggested he should tie it to his back and carry it tortoise-like. Alexei

saw the point of the comparison during the second hour of his ride when his speed had decreased appreciably, but he felt not the slightest regret for having taken the enormous volume.

The atlas became his best friend and companion. He would sit alone with it for hours studying the probable route of the Dezhnev and trying to imagine what treasures were contained in the outlines of the islands, the capricious jagged coastlines, the purple lines of warm sea streams, the blue clusters of ocean shipping routes, the small lettering of countless names. It was not long before he had his favourites. Top of the list was the "Map of the Ocean Hemisphere." In this the projection was so skilful that it contained no more than the white patch of the Antarctic, the dock-tailed tip of South America, plus Australia, New Guinea and Borneo. All the rest of this map of one half of the globe lay deluged under the splendid unrestricted blueness of three oceans—the Pacific, the Atlantic and the Indian; and when Alexei let his eyes rest on that page in the atlas he stopped breathing, so magnificent and vast was this expanse of salt water where the deep blue ink was kilometres deep.

His second favourite was the "Map of Canals and Straits." He was not much interested in the canals but the straits.... They were like priceless pearls strung on a magic necklace formed by the *Dezhnev*'s voyage around the Eurasian mainland from Leningrad to Vladivostok: the Sound, Kattegat and Skagerrak, Straits of Dover, Mozambique, the Moluccas, Singapore, Taiwan Strait, Tsushima.... The names rang like poetry. Gazing ahead, his eyes clouded with dreams, Alexei repeated them from memory and saw in front of him a schooner rolling as it fought the storm. Incidentally, the image did not spring from the realm of imagination but from the label on the bottle of efter-shave lotion which Yershov had either forgotten to pack or simply discarded, for there were only a few drops left in it. Alexei found it on his return from the station and at once stood

it on his desk. From time to time he removed the stopper and then that unusual ship's smell would spread through the room, so that he could see Yershov shaving at the window and hear his deep voice rumbling.

Before long, Alexei was really longing for Yershov's company. Great was his joy, therefore, when, at long last, a letter arrived from Leningrad.

In it Yershov informed Alexei's father somewhat laconically that there had been a slight change of plan: he was being sent immediately on a trip which, though quite short, had its complications. As a result he had been unable to make all the enquiries necessary about Alexei's plans, but as he remained master of the *Dezhnev* he hoped on his return to fix everything up and to receive his superiors' permission.

The letter clearly left something unsaid. And that inner calm in which Alexei had been living all these days was dissipated. At first he felt sure it was all up with the Dezhnev: Yershov would be hounded from trip to trip and they would clean forget he was master of the Dezhnev. He grew quite dejected; but two days later a postcard arrived, addressed to him direct this time. It carried the picture of a polar bear, a denizen of the Moscow Zoo, and a brief joke: "Don't think of it—and you'll be cured!" The card bore an Odessa postmark and Alexei realized that it was a greeting before sailing. He felt happier, laughed at his worries about the *Dezhnev* and returned to his atlas with renewed fervour; he just could not bring himself to take it back to the frontier post although his "week" was long up. However, Vasya's birthday was in the offing, so he decided to keep the atlas a little longer: what was the point in cycling over twice within such a short time?

On the morning of the seventh of August he turned to the atlas we moment he woke: he wanted to enjoy it to his heart's content this last day. He bade farewell to his beloved, tracing once again the whole route of his future voyage, already studied in such detail, and started to thumb his way through the atlas from cover to cover. In his preoccupation he did not hear his father come into the room; it was only when he felt a hand on his shoulder that he raised his head.

Sergei Petrovich looked pale, and his lips seemed to be trembling strangely.

"Alyosha," he said quietly, averting his eyes. "I've had

a letter. From Leningrad."

Alexei suddenly felt his throat contract. He looked at his father in silence, his eyes full of urgency.

"Pyotr Ilyich has been killed," said Sergei Petrovich with an effort, then added for some reason: "So that's that."

He laid a sheet of writing paper on the atlas. Alexei read the brief letter signed by an unfamiliar name. He understood nothing; he forced himself to concentrate and read it through again. Only then did he grasp its meaning.

The letter announced that the ship Yershov had taken from Odessa to Barcelona with a cargo of food for Spanish children had been torpedoed by a fascist submarine. Four survivors had been picked up later by a French ship and from them it had been learned that the torpedo struck immediately under the bridge where Yershov had been standing.

The letter lay on a map that bore the long heading: "Average Temperatures in July on the Surface of the Earth." Alexei read these words over mechanically several times and then, trying not to look at the letter, which covered the area of Greenland, shifted his eyes to the middle of the map and, through force of habit, traced the route of the *Dezhnev* along the coasts of Europe and Africa.

But everything was flooded in blood. The Mediterranean, the Bay of Biscay, the Atlantic Ocean itself lay under various shades of red—the colour of blood. In places the water had grown dark, the colour of dried blood, elsewhere it glowed crimson as if the blood flowed from a fresh wound. Everywhere he looked he saw blood. Continents swam in it. Only the uninhabited Arctic and Antarctic stood out with white and yellow patches. Nowhere was the sea

water blue, nowhere was the ocean splendid and unrestricted. That was all a fairy-tale. The continents swam in blood. That reminded him vaguely of something he had seen before. Ah yes, that slaughter-house. Nowhere a blue sea. There are mines everywhere. Where could he sail to? There were submarines in the sea. Where could the ships pass? Why is everything so red, though? The Atlantic Ocean, the Pacific, too. Ah, I know. That's the average July temperature and it's hot in July. But there isn't a war on now. Then what about that explosion right under the bridge where the captain was standing? Oh, how he wanted to cry, yet he would not. "Average Temperatures in July on the Surface of the Earth." What a pity it's all up now about that trip of the Dezhnev. But it was Pyotr Ilyich he ought to feel sorry about now, not that. He ought to say something, oughtn't he? Father was standing there waiting. Hard on him, they were old friends. "Average Temperatures...."

"Well, there's nothing to be done about it, I suppose," Alexei said at length in an unfamiliar voice. "Nothing, I suppose, to be done.... I'll go now. I promised Vasya."

He carefully picked up the letter and, with eyes averted, handed it to his father. Then he closed the atlas, but his hands did not obey him and the heavy volume slid along the desk and knocked over the bottle bearing the picture of a schooner fighting a storm. The bottle fell on the floor and immediately the room was flooded with that peculiar ship's smell of tarry ropes, coal smoke and wet paint. Alexei gasped and dived for the bottle. It was broken at the neck and the last drops of lotion dripped on to the floor and were lost in the crevices between the floor boards. And as if it was only then that he understood what had happened, he fell on the bottle and burst into desperate, uncontrollably wild sobbing, blind and insensitive to everything except his terrible, crushing grief.

When he me to his senses he lay in his mother's arms. She said nothing to console him, she simply stroked his brow, occasionally leaning over him and pressing her lips gently to the nape of his neck; little by little the violence of

Alexei's grief spent itself and it was followed by a heavy, joyless calm. He gave one more convulsive sob, rose to his feet and went to the tap.

"I've got to see Vasya anyway," he said with the towel

in his hands. "Don't worry, I'm better now."

"Will you be away long?"

"I don't know. Two or three days. As usual."

"Go if you think it's best."

With unnatural care he slowly wrapped the atlas up in sheets of newspaper, bound it with a strap and slung it over his shoulder. His mother saw him off.

Beyond the farm spinney, in the direction he was going, a large rain cloud loomed halfway up the sky.

"You'd better stay, dear," his mother said, looking at him uneasily. "There's a thunderstorm on the way."

"I must go, Mum," he said with a degree of firmness unusual for him. "But I'll take a raincoat."

He took his tarpaulin from the hall, stuck it through the straps of the luggage rack, kissed his mother and cycled away, supporting his enormous burden with an elbow. A shaggy-coated dog stuck to the bike for a while, but thinking better of scampering in such heat, barked "Happy journey" and stretched out again in the dust with its tongue lolling out.

Alexei's mother remained on the porch for a long time watching him on his way. The road began at the farm itself and ran into the steppe straight as an arrow, so she could see Alexei until he turned into a tiny dot indistinguishable against the black background of the sky. But though she had lost sight of him she went on looking with deep foreboding into the dark mass that had swallowed up her son.

The cloud was certainly of unusual appearance. Deep brown in the middle, it paled to a drab violet on the edges as it came creeping over the horizon, for all the world like some gigantic monster preparing to fall on the steppe and shatter and crush everything that lay under the weight of its belly. Within its great gloomy body something was

twisting and turning, giving the impression of powerful muscles kneading under a thick skin in preparation for their work of destruction. The sun struck the cloud obliquely, fully illuminating its enormous bulk, and by its light could be seen globe-shaped masses of vapour which crept out towards the edges and, as they condensed, emitted new round masses to swell the size of the cloud. From time to time a barely visible thread of blue lightning flashed silently in this dense cloud.

There was something sinister, ominous about the stirring mass with its flashes of lightning and its constant expansion. Although the sun shone bright and unheeding over the farm, and the sky was a bottomless blue, and the hot lazy air was motionless, anyone could see that the cloud, though still distant and silent, would eventually hang over the farm and that a thunderstorm was inevitable. Alexei, of course, would find himself in the storm considerably earlier.

But it was not this that worried his mother. Her maternal instinct told her that this grievous day had wrought a change in Alexei, the significance of which she could not yet fully grasp. A quarter of an hour before, a sobbing boy had laid his head on her lap and she was able to comfort him with her tenderness, but it was a man who was riding away, a man who had taken his own manly decision. What that decision was she did not know, but she felt it in everything: in his firm tones, in the way he was riding straight into what promised to be a terrible storm. And she no longer possessed the power to prevent him going or to make him turn back.

So she stood on the porch gazing across the steppe long after Alexei had ridden out of sight—standing and staring as hundreds of thousands of mothers were destined to stand and stare after their sons a few years later....

Her instanct had not deceived her. It was a new Alexei who was riding across the steppe into the storm. Now that the first blunt shock of grief had passed and the first con-

vulsion of despair had left his heart, he found himself able to think intelligently about what had happened. He made a brave effort to measure his own misfortune. It was impossibly huge: his whole future had just come crashing down. He had lost a friend, his first grown-up friend. His dreams of sailing the Seven Seas had vanished. It was horrible, futile even to think of the idea now.

Then he forced his mind towards the future. What was he to do, "which way was he to go in life" now? But he found it impossible to think ahead. That morning the future had been plain for years ahead, up to his navigator's certificate at least; but now. . . . His mind would not go beyond that evening. He would find Vasya and tell him everything; then, perhaps, something would come clear. But what could Vasya say? No, he would have to find his own way forward. No one could help him except himself. Pyotr Ilyich had been right there. He would have to think for himself.

So Alexei thought—despite his aching heart and his gnawing despair he thought, stubbornly, teeth clenched. Like someone whose house had been burned down and who walks through the embers looking for something that had survived the flames, Alexei searched his empty spirit for something with which he could go on living.

At first he thought it was going to be impossible to find anything useful amid the wreckage of his childhood that had crashed down an hour before. He remembered with sad wonder his oath on the lake, the blue-grey Sevastopol cruiser, the argument with his father in the pine forest, the naval circle at school, the trouble he and Vasya had in getting those recommendations from the Komsomol committee.... That was all so naive, so schoolboyish, just links in a snapped chain. Then that stern imperative word "duty" floated across his mind. And the links of the chain unexpectedly joined together. In the smoke of explosions and the spilling of blood they were forged once more into a single chain which could never again be snapped.

Thought by thought, point by point, his decision came to

maturity. It was nothing new in itself. What was new about it was the sense of conviction Alexei felt in all his being for the first time in his life—that feeling, probably, of which Yershov had spoken. So here it is, thought Alexei; it's come by itself. And he recognized it at once as one recognizes the emotion of love though it comes for the first time. No need for explanations, for argument. It was all extraordinarily simple: there was no other conceivable way for him. There they were, all the arguments and proofs. He knew there was nothing else in life for him.

Nothing—because there was no life in life. Because it was impossible to think of doing anything, of creating or perfecting anything while there is a great, swelling thundercloud like this hanging over your whole life. The cloud cannot dissolve, it can only burst in a storm that will destroy everything you have done and kill all your friends, and you, too. "There's a thunderstorm on the way," his mother had said. Surprising that people notice thunderstorms and not war. That cloud was like war. Somewhere over there near the lake the storm must have broken and the rain was pelting down; here it was still warm and sunny but that didn't mean there wasn't a storm somewhere. That was something he himself had not understood till now. "There's sure to be a war." That was something he had understood. But apparently there was a war going on already. And now the only question was whether he would be able to take his place in the ranks in time for the moment the thunderstorm reached this quiet place where the sun still shone.

So it was that this decisive hour in Alexei Reshetnikov's life was always linked in his mind with the image of that sinister cloud in which grim forces moved and lightning flashed.

Each year brought war nearer. The place where Alexei lived and studied remained quiet and sunny, but far away to the east, near Lake Khasan, the lightning struck and the thunder pealed. Then those flashes of lightning were seen

around more often, showing that the storm was near; on the Khalkhin Gol River, in the Carpathians, in the snows of the Karelian Isthmus, and then on one short night in June the storm broke with a devastating hail of bombs and shells.

## CHAPTER FIVE

If the ceiling of a railway carriage were to be lowered to the level of the luggage rack and the compartment broadened sufficiently to allow two more berths to be fitted, one above the other, along the window on one side, and a table with sides that let down and two narrow lockers near the door were fixed in the rest of the space, you would get something like the wardroom aft.

This room, instead of being used as an officers' mess, was simply a six-berth mess deck. In the cramped conditions on board it provided sleeping-space for the boatswain, the torpedo gunner's mate and the chief wireless operator in the lower berths and for three seamen on the top row. But as, during the day, the upper berths were let down to form the backs of divan seats cosily arranged around three sides of a table where one could have dinner, drink tea, play chess or write letters, this place did in fact fulfil some of the functions of a wardroom.

On Reshetnikov's sloop the resemblance to a railway compartment was further emphasized by the fact that when the ship was at sea the whole place shook with a light, ceaseless vibration.

This regrettable failing was not inherent in SK 0944—it was the result of battle, like a nervous tic after serious concussion. At high speed the starboard propeller shaft set up an irritating vibration, a source of much concern to Chief Engineer Bykov who felt every shortcoming in the engines like a stab in the heart. No matter what adventures the sloop had been through, you could not have found a single piece of machinery, length of cable or accessory which was not the worse for the war in some way or another.

Other wounds had been healed, repaired and "made shipshape" by Bykov's hands, no less nimble and tireless for the scars and burns they bore; but this concussion alone had been too much for his art: the vibration could be got rid of only by having the ship on the stocks and that was possible only at the main base and would take much time. So the sloop had to go on sailing with this delirious "fever" which had practically no effect on its speed or on the accuracy of its gunfire. But every time the order of "Full speed ahead" came from the bridge and the indicator of the tachometer reached that accursed number of revs at which the stern began to shake with an ague worse than that of malaria, Bykov looked grim and demonstratively moved away from the port and starboard engines to his favourite the middle engine, which, like the good shaft-horse it was, distinguished itself from its reckless, capricious team-mates by its conscientiousness and steady temperament.

The vibration made itself particularly felt in the stern, that is, in the wardroom. Every object on the table would run jiggling and jumping along the oilcloth in different directions till it reached the obstacle of the brass rail at the edge, which Bykov had specially constructed. That is why many of the social functions of the wardroom had to be abandoned at sea. Letter-writing, for instance, would have been imprudent: relatives who saw the quavering handwriting and the jostling letters might conclude that their dear son or husband was in a state of severe nervous prostration. The chess-men, too, had lain useless in the locker since the day a game of a character extremely rare in the history of chess was played on SK 0944. A legal official of the base and the Surgeon Captain who happened to be on board together had the idea of killing time over the chess-board, only to discover half-way through their match that there was nothing to be done about it, both kings having long lain in check. The reason for this was that while the players were reflecting on their moves, rooks, knights, pawns and even the stately queens were dancing a wild jig together, changing positions arbitrarily and shamelessly exposing their kings to the enemy. So it happened that at sea the ward-room of SK 0944 could be used only for meals, and then only with the most frugal outlay of crockery. Neither the captain nor his number one nor the chief engineer had time either to write letters or play chess during a trip and the occasional passenger had to invent his own means of killing time.

This time there were two passengers in the wardroom, a Lieutenant Voronin who was in charge of the reconnaissance group and a Major Lunikov, commanding officer of a famous detachment of marines. Both of them wore wadded jackets and trousers and heavy low-topped boots. Piled up on the port divan lay everything that had been hanging on the officers when they came on board—haversacks, hand grenades, helmets, torches, kit bags, flasks, binoculars, submachine-guns, spare ammunition drums and mess-tins. It was incredible that all those things had been removed from the shoulders of only two men.

The work these two had found to do was in no way hindered by the ship's "fever": Voronin held a large-scale map and the Major, without looking at it and keeping his eyes on the ceiling, was giving a precise, deliberate description of the country the landing party would have to cross under cover of darkness. It was as though a map were spread on the ceiling, so accurately did he list all the landmarks which could be used for orientation in the dark: sharp twists in the gorge into which they were to plunge from the beach; an avenue leading to the burned-down houses of a state farm, where it was better to strike due north in order to intersect the main road at a deserted place. He had got as far as the vineyard which indicated a place where it was safe to go up into the mountains when Lieutenant Reshetnikov entered the wardroom.

"Fold your map, Comrade Voronin, our host's come for his supper," said the Major, moving to the middle of the divan.

"We feed our passengers too," said Reshetnikov with a smile, and removed his fur-lined cap.

"Well, we've really finished," said Voronin, slipping the map into its case. "We'd reached the mountains and by then

it would be growing light."

The Major looked at him quizzically and smiled. The smile made the dry and weathered skin of his face wrinkle at the corners of his eyes, and this changed his expression immediately: the tense concentrated look with which he had been searching the ceiling for the details of the invisible

map was replaced by a mischievous, ironic look.

"Did you say finished?" he asked. "You and I have been taking a little stroll without the enemy.... But what happens if, when we get to the main road—you remember, there's a nice little height there—we find the Germans have set an ambush for us? You just try and work out where we ought to make for then.... Oh, no, Lieutenant," he went on, checking the other's movement, "don't take your map out, you've had one good look at it. Try and recall the place without it."

Lieutenant Voronin raised his eyes to the ceiling as if looking for the Major's magic map, but apparently it was not very legible, for he sighed and shook his head.

"Pretty difficult, Comrade Major...."

"And if you have to remember it when we're on shore? It's easy here: we've got no one shooting at us and there's no hurry.... Memorize it, Lieutenant, while there's time. An officer must have the whole map in his head. That's the least you can expect of him. Why, what if you should lose it?"

"I've given Sergeant Zhukov a second one," Voronin said huffily.

"Huh, so you've found a safe.... And what if your Zhukov steps on a mine? No, you try without the map. I'll go for a stroll on deck while it's still light...."

Voronin slumped back on the divan and shut his eyes tightly. Apparently he found it easier to remember the map that way. The Major put on his helmet and was about to rise when, glancing at his companion, he changed his mind, took out a tin of tobacco and seriously set about rolling a supply of cigarettes, deftly loosening the tobacco with thin nervous fingers which looked quite unlike those of a hardened man of the trenches.

Reshetnikov lit up too and cast the Major a curious glance. He had heard much about Major Lunikov but was seeing him only the second time. They had met that morning at the flotilla commander's briefing. Then, Lunikov had disappointed him. Compared with Vladykin—always so smart, clean-shaven, almost dandyish, always so fresh, even after a sleepless night on operations (for which Reshetnikov secretly envied him), the Major with his baggy, worn-out jacket and threadbare trousers tucked into the tops of his boots, looked uninspiring and nondescript. His manner of speech, too—slow, quiet, as if he was thinking aloud—his constant habit of interrupting himself with "And if not?"also compared unfavourably with Vladykin's clear, precise way of talking, and was quite unmilitary. Reshetnikov was considerably surprised. Surely this could not be the same Lunikov whose courage and resolution was a subject of delighted comment among the seamen who had returned in the cruiser from Sevastopol where they had served in his detachment of marines? From these tales he knew that Lunikov had joined the Navy from the reserve at the outbreak of war, that he was an engineer by profession and not a mechanical one either: he had been in some planning office or the editor of a technical paper or something. Perhaps that explained his unmilitary garrulousness and that "profoundly civilian look" which Reshetnikov, with all the mercilessness of a young officer, attributed to him when he heard the Major and Vladykin talking together.

True, the matter under discussion had been a complicated and confusing one.

The loss of the boat from Senior Lieutenant Somov's sloop, which had occurred the week before, indicated that

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the small bay which, for convenience' sake, Lunikov proposed referring to during the briefing as "Baffling Cove," had ceased to be the reliable place for maintaining liaison with the partisans and clandestine workers of the Crimea which it had been considered till now. It had been used for over a dozen successful landings of reconnaissance groups or of groups sent to the partisan detachments; this was the place where men returning from missions on shore had been picked up. Everything had gone like clock-work. To this the location of the cove had contributed: it lay hidden between high steep cliffs, and was very easily approached from the sea, thanks to a distinctive cape that jutted out near by; besides, it was far from the villages and holiday resorts and there were no German garrisons in the locality. Reshetnikov knew all this from his own experience, for he had visited the place three times: twice as a matter of routine training on the sloop of Lieutenant Baburchenok, when a reconnaissance group had been put ashore and picked up again four nights later, and once quite on his own, shortly before the Somov mishap, when he had put five men ashore and returned with the boat.

What had happened in the cove during the landing of a later party by Senior Lieutenant Somov—both to the men themselves and to the boat—might take a long time to find out: the scouts had to break through the lines near Kerch, and they were not allowed to use radio. But circumstances of extreme importance (exactly what they were Reshetnikov was not told, but he knew that the Major had been sent for by the Commander of the Fleet) made it essential to put ashore a reconnaissance group from Lunikov's detachment at Baffling Cove that very night and to pick them up again with the sloop on the following night.

The second part of the mission could be fulfilled only on the condition that the boat in which the men would be landed returned safely to the sloop. If it did not, it would mean the Germans had set a trap of some sort at the cove. Then another group would have to be sent on the same mission but to a different, more remote beach.

Vladykin pointed it out to the Major on the map. The Major measured the distance (it was then that Reshetnikov first noticed his fingers—the thin fingers of an office worker) and said that in that case the operation would take eight or nine days, maybe more, and, further, that as it would be impossible to fix the day when the group could reach the beach the whole thing would be sheer nonsense. Lunikov turned down all other proposed landing places with the same captious criticisms and drove Vladykin into an impasse with his irritating "And if not?" Reshetnikov began to lose patience. It looked as if the Major wanted to organize a trip for his scouts in the rear of the enemy with maximum comfort and minimum risk; and in his mind Reshetnikov labelled him as over-cautious.

However, the Major ended the conversation in an unexpected way: he put the dividers down on the map and declared that it was obvious they would have to risk a landing that night at Baffling Cove and that he would accompany his men. If they did not run into trouble and the boat got back to the sloop safely, then the sloop was to return to the cove to pick them up the next night. But if the boat failed to return to the sloop, well, then they'd have to write off Baffling Cove once and for all and the scouts would fend for themselves. In that case the Fleet Commander would have to be informed immediately that the mission had not been fulfilled and a sloop sent with another landing party to the other place Vladykin had suggested.

At that, the long conference ended and Reshetnikov went on board, feeling annoyed at the prospect of the trouble Lunikov, with his pernickety, meticulous approach to everything, looked like causing him during the voyage and the landing operation.

However, he was surprised to find that the Major caused nobody any trouble at all. Once on board SK 0944 he made a business-like inspection of the boat, which had already

been hoisted on deck, worked out the most convenient way of seating the scouts in it and asked Reshetnikov to provide them with quarters where they could sleep soundly during the trip; after which he went into the wardroom and lay down to sleep himself. Now, as he sat fiddling with the cigarettes, casting an occasional mocking glance at Voronin who was torturing himself with his invisible map, the Major looked tranquil, rested, even gay.

In fact, he looked a different man from the morning. The wadded jacket, which is an uncouth and ugly garment, suited him surprisingly well; it was clear that he felt freer and more at ease in it than in a regulation coat. It fitted his chest and shoulders closely, somewhat resembling medieval armour-plate, or, to be more precise, the protruding part of an embossed cuirass. This impression may have owed something to the fact that the Major had forgotten to remove his helmet: his face, framed in the metal of battle dress, looked martial and virile. He must have been well over thirty, maybe nearing forty, but when he turned his head with rapid vivacious movements to look at Voronin and smile, the helmet concealed his greying temples, the wrinkles at the corners of his mouth—a merciless sign of age—disappeared, and he looked quite young. Besides, he seemed somehow braced and refreshed and enlivened, like a man who has fulfilled a boring duty and gone on to an interesting job of work that suits him. Even the way he talked struck Reshetnikov differently now: although Lunikov went on overworking that phrase "And if not?" which had irritated Reshetnikov so much in the morning, now he felt ashamed of himself for having mistaken that necessary deliberation and care before taking any decision for a sign of over-cautiousness.

Now the calm which Lunikov displayed as he rolled his cigarettes before landing on the dangerous coast, the confidence with which, without a glance at the map that, apparently, was imprinted on his brain in every detail, he sought for ways through the darkness, the insistence with

which he made Voronin memorize the route, everything he had done since coming on board, showed him to be a changed man. It was clear that now, when all alternatives for the landing had been examined and rejected, leaving but one, the best, the Major intended to do just what had been decided. This confidence won Reshetnikov over completely to him, and he suddenly found himself liking him.

"I'm sorry I didn't come in to see you earlier," he said with regret. "The sunset's just finished. It was a beauty...." Lunikov smiled.

"Oh, we were taking our time over the map here. Going to be long, Lieutenant? You've been surrounded by the Germans some time now, you and the scouts have had your fill and I'm right up the spout."

Voronin opened his eyes.

"On the left there's a nice little glen but where it leads to I'm damned if I can remember," he said, angry with himself. "I'll have to take another look at the map, Comrade Major...."

"All right, take a peek at it," sighed Lunikov. "But let it be the last time. If you fail after that I'll leave you on board."

Voronin hurriedly unfolded the map and by the assiduity with which he bent over that wretched glen Reshetnikov realized that the Major's threat had not been uttered lightly, and this, too, pleased him. He thought with pride that had he been asked what course he would take to approach Baffling Cove, he would have kept no one waiting while he ran into the chart-room. With a look of sympathy not unmixed with mockery he watched Voronin lean back on the divan again, shut his eyes and whisper something to himself as if repeating a lesson.

Just then there came in Chief Engineer Bykov. His hands which bore black and yellow stains, proof against innumerable scrubbings—the ineradicable traces of his constant struggle with the engines—he kept shyly behind his back.

"Time's up, Lieutenant, I can hear supper coming," said

Lunikov, picking up his tin of tobacco. "Now the Captain and I will drink your tot of vodka for you; it'll keep your head clearer."

He removed his helmet and laughed, and in that laugh Reshetnikov also found something extraordinarily attractive. By now the Major had completely conquered him.

Reshetnikov was still of an age when a man unconsciously seeks among the people he meets someone to imitate or rather someone whose example can teach him how to handle people, whether to like them or hate them, how to command men and fight the enemy-in short, how to behave in surroundings that were still incomprehensible, complicated and full of all kinds of surprises, in a life that was beginning to reveal its mysterious depths to him. There had been several such idols in his life, people about whom he had waxed enthusiastic on first acquaintance only to be disappointed on the next, and each had left some traces on his character—in his gestures, his manner of speech, his understanding of people. And now he felt sorry that his acquaintanceship with Lunikov was going to be limited to this brief encounter; he longed to be with him in the same detachment or the same ship, and he realized with all his being why people who had known him earlier referred to him with such delight.

"We don't drink here, Comrade Major," he said, laughing too. "That's the rule in the sloops: we keep our liquor in case we get a ducking or run into a storm. But when we have visitors..." He edged open the door into the narrow corridor from where, indeed, the rattle of crockery could be heard, and called out: "Comrade Zhadan, serve our visitors with a ration of vodka each."

Mikola Zhadan appeared at the door. He was the only deck-hand on board, and was ship's cook, wardroom steward and a member of the aft gun-crew as well: sloops are so small that both people and space have to serve many highly varied functions at once. He was carrying a tureen of steaming hot soup, with his fingers supporting another

small bowl by its handle. How he managed to manoeuvre the steep companion-way, was a mystery.

"I'll bring it straightaway, Comrade Captain, as soon as I've laid the table," Zhadan replied readily. He set the soup on the table and started laying plates, knives and forks; obedient to the feverish law of the wardroom, they at once began to jingle, and crept across the table like lively cockroaches.

"No, it's not necessary," Lunikov hurried to say. "I was only speaking for effect. The Lieutenant and I are both at an age when vodka's bad for us: I'm too old and he's too young. But why you sailors don't drink surprises me..."

"Everyone has his habits," Reshetnikov said serious!y, grabbing for his spoon which had already reached the edge of the table. "Take our Chief here, for instance. He prefers to save up for a week and then settle in full. One ration only tickles his thirst, he says. Isn't that so, Comrade Bykov?"

"Oh, come now, Comrade Lieutenant," said Bykov, looking embarrassed. "It only happened once. Why bring it up against me?"

"Shall I tell the Major what happened?" Reshetnikov threatened.

Bykov looked worried but, luckily for him, Zhadan finished the simple process of laying the table and placed the small bowl in front of Reshetnikov.

"What have I done to deserve special food?" Reshetnikov asked, frowning. "D'you think I'm ill?"

"You see, Comrade Lieutenant," replied Zhadan, deftly serving the soup from the tureen, "the depot gave us millet again for supper and you don't like it. This is some tinned soup left over from dinner, do eat it up...."

Lunikov cast Zhadan a swift glance and smiled as if making a mental note of something. Reshetnikov noticed it and flared up:

"More of your tricks. How many times have I told you to give me the same food as everybody else? It's a shame....
Guests having one thing and their host another..."

"Don't worry about the guests, we happen to prefer millet soup," the Major said calmly and placed his hand over his plate. "That's enough, Comrade Zhadan..."

"Eat up, eat up," said Zhadan hospitably. "I can give you a second helping. When will you have a chance to eat hot food? I made some over...."

He stood at the door for a moment, looking from the visitors to the Captain. His broad freckled face expressed satisfaction at the way they were all relishing their supper. Then he informed them in the same rapturous tones:

"There's sausage with cabbage to follow, then a drop of cocoa."

"Where did you get the cocoa?" asked Bykov in surprise.

"From friends of our ship on shore. I happened to be at the hospital seeing Sizov and I spoke to the doctor there. Told her that with such a trip ahead of us we needed vitamins to get us there."

Reshetnikov looked as if he was about to say something, but just shook his fist and tackled his "special soup." Zhadan disappeared. Lunikov looked after him and turned to Reshetnikov.

"What's the idea of going for him like that? Your Zhadan is a man with a heart and it's a pity you don't see that.... Oh, of course you see it, you just don't want to show it in front of visitors."

"Of course, I can see it," said Reshetnikov without looking up. "All the same. . . ."

"And surely you're glad to have someone taking such care of you on board?"

Reshetnikov smiled.

"What makes you think it's only of me? He's not set eyes on you, or on the scouts either, but he cooked extra food, he said. It's his nature, he likes to look after people."

"It's one thing to look after people, it's another to behow shall I say?—to be warm-hearted," said Lunikov pensively. "It's a good quality to have in family life, still more in the family we men in the services belong to. A captain

who is liked by his men in a straightforward, human way finds it much easier to fight.... That captain is a lucky man."

Reshetnikov was on the point of retorting that the Major had nothing to complain of since it was obvious that those who had been with him in Sevastopol liked him in just that way, but he felt his remark would be out of place and held his tongue. The Major supped his soup with zest and laid his spoon in the empty plate. It at once began to jingle faintly. He looked at it with surprise.

"Why do you have so much vibration in this ship? I've been on a good many sloops but I've never known anything like this."

Reshetnikov was glad the subject had been changed.

"Result of a war wound," he said vivaciously. "It happened before my time. Chief ought to tell you what happened. He saved the sloop that time."

But Bykov could not be drawn out. In spite of promptings from Reshetnikov who was clearly most anxious to show the Major what a treasure he had in Bykov, all he would say was that the starboard propeller shaft had been damaged last October when the sloop had run on a reef and that he was not able to repair it. At length Reshetnikov had to tell the story himself.

What had happened was this. Paramonov and another sloop in his group had taken a number of partisans off the Crimean coast where the Germans were pressing them towards the sea. To save time Paramonov had taken the sloop close inshore and the partisans, leaping from rock to rock, had just reached the ship when the Germans opened fire. The sloop was already in the open sea when its stern ran hard against a reef. Had it not been for the Chief it would have stuck there for ever: the rudder was jammed and water was pouring fast into the engine-room because of the damage to the shaft of the starboard screw. Bykov had not only managed to...

"That's all, Comrade Lieutenant," interrupted Bykov who had been waiting for this point in the tale with some con-

cern. "The water wasn't worth mentioning, and the rudder...."

"Don't interrupt," said Reshetnikov abruptly. "There was water enough, it might have stopped the other two engines. Well, our chief engineer, Comrade Bykov, had an idea...."

At this point Reshetnikov, who wished at all costs to convince the Major of Bykov's talents, launched into details so technical that neither Lunikov nor Voronin understood him. One thing was clear: the half-submerged sloop carried on, although its rudder was out of action. The second sloop, under Lieutenant Kalitin's command, had run its bows on to a rock and could not get clear on its own. Manoeuvring with the two engines in the absence of the rudder, Paramonov somehow managed to reach the sloop and to tow her off the rocks. Kalitin then offered to take Paramonov's sloop in tow until the rudder could be repaired. The tow-rope was actually being fixed when it was discovered that the partisans were eight men short. Then a flare lit up the two sloops lying alongside each other, and the German fire grew more intense. Paramonov, as the senior, ordered Kalitin to sail into deeper water and draw the enemy's fire so that his own sloop, lying nearer to the shore, could get on with the rudder repairs undisturbed while waiting for the rest of the partisans. The ruse worked: the moment Kalitin drew out from the shore the Germans directed all their fire on him, thinking they would be able to polish off the other sloop later after preventing Kalitin from getting away. Before long, bright quivering flames were shooting up over the dark water far from the rocks, and in the light of the next flare Kalitin's sloop could be seen wrapped in a pall of white smoke from which occasional tongues of flame shot high into the air. But the blazing sloop went on manoeuvring with desperate pertinacity, confusing the German gunners and skilfully avoiding their fire. In their haste to finish it off the enemy left Paramonov's sloop in peace and soon, with its rudder repaired, it dashed out to sea under two engines....

"But what about Kalitin's sloop?" asked Lunikov, who was following the tale intently. "Went on burning?"

Reshetnikov had apparently been expecting this question; he smiled with satisfaction.

"There was no question of its being on fire, Comrade Major. Paramonov had ordered it to set up smoke from the stern as soon as the shelling came close—told 'em to soak some rags in petrol and set them alight in the stern so as to fool the Germans. Kalitin sacrificed a couple of his own sheets in the process...."

"That's really splendid!" exclaimed Voronin with a laugh.

The Major smiled.

"Paramonov, Paramonov..." he mused. "Surely it wasn't the same Paramonov who brought practically a hundred men at a time out of Sevastopol?"

"The very one, Comrade Major," Bykov assured him. "Not quite a hundred but sixty-seven on the first trip, seventy-six on the second and eighty-seven on the third."

"Eighty-seven!" marvelled Voronin. "Where on earth did he find room for them?"

"Oh, in the mess deck and here in the wardroom.... They stood shoulder to shoulder like in a tramcar, all the way to Novorossiisk."

"Well, well," Voronin shook his head. "You might easily have capsized."

"We might, if they'd been on deck. But Paramonov sent them all below and we had no trouble. The wheel wasn't swung more than five degrees, we had calm weather and everything went normally..." Bykov smiled. "Normally, that is, so long as we had marines on board. But on the third trip we took on soldiers and that led to a real scene. They just wouldn't go below: they were in a state of nerves, feeling awful. You see, they'd heard all kinds of things. Who would go willingly into a mousetrap like that? Paramonov tried one thing and another but they stayed aloft; there was a real risk we'd capsize. Then he bawled out at the top of his voice: 'Prepare to dive!' I came on deck. 'Look here,' I

told those men, 'if you're ready to swim you stay aloft, because we're going to do the rest of the trip under water. The night is over. There are planes after us.' The deck was clear in a second, we battened down the hatchways, and the metacentre stood steady."

"Splendid!" Voronin was delighted.

The Major looked at Bykov with amazement and laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks. He raised a hand, tried to speak but again laughed so infectiously that even Reshetnikov, for whom the story was by no means new, found himself laughing too. At length the Major managed to get a word or two out:

"I ... I went below too!"

"You? Where?" asked Reshetnikov.

"Into a mess deck.... Somewhere in the bows."

Bykov looked dumbfounded.

"D'you mean to say you were on board, Comrade Major?"

"I was," said Lunikov, regaining his breath. "That was on the first of July, wasn't it? At night."

"Correct."

"From Streletskaya Bay?"

"Correct, Comrade Major."

"Yes, I was there.... It was dark and there was an awful crowd and a lot of shouting.... My boys shoved me somewhere from the jetty—I was wounded—in the head and shoulder. When I came to I was sitting near a hatchway among a lot of legs and rifles. Very cramped it was too. Suddenly all the legs disappeared and I felt better. I was taking a good deep breath of fresh air when I heard a voice, very sharp, saying: 'You there, d'you want to be washed overboard? Didn't you hear the order to dive? Get below with you....' Do you think it could have been you who shoved me below, Comrade Bykov?"

Now it was Reshetnikov's turn to burst out laughing.

"Did you believe him?"

"I wasn't in a state to believe or disbelieve anything—all I remember was those words, then I passed out again. Later

on, when I was in hospital, we had a big argument about it all: they told me I'd been brought in Paramonov's sloop. I said I'd come in a submarine... My head was in a whirl and I had no idea who to thank... Well, now I know."

The Major put his hand in his pocket for a cigarette and went on seriously:

"A joke's a joke, but the fact is Paramonov saved my life. I was one of the last to be taken on board. I remember someone shouting: 'No more on board, wait for the next ship!' Then someone said: 'The captain's agreed to three more—wounded.' So that's how I got lugged on board. But I could never find those boys of mine who carried me down to the cove. I really must thank Paramonov. Where is he now? He must have a flotilla now."

"Killed," said Bykov shortly.

"Ah," said Lunikov and a sudden silence fell over the table, broken only by the faint rattle of the spoons on the plates and the low hum of the engines behind the bulkhead, their three voices blending like a solemn organ chord.

The silence of fighting-men after the terse word "killed" is something remarkable, ineffable. Those who knew the dead man think about him and recall him as he was when he lived. Those who did not know him remember some friend of theirs whom death has greedily wrenched from a family of comrades. And, because death always lurks somewhere near, all are thinking about themselves too, some with surprise that they are still alive, others banishing the thought that perhaps on the morrow someone will be using that pregnant word about him; and there are those who rejoice in secret, guarding the feeling from others as from themselves, that once again death has struck down not him but another. And someone for the hundredth time will, on hearing the news, gain an inexplicable sense of confidence that no matter how many people may perish in this war, death cannot, ought not, simply has no right to touch him, a man strong in body, sound in mind and successful in his

deeds, bound to life with a thousand stout bonds, one whose mother still calls him by his baby-name and another, younger woman, by a new, tender name of her own devising, known only to the two of them—a man who still has so much to do in life, so many thoughts to think, so many feelings to experience. And someone else, on the contrary, will contemplate death for the hundredth time with the calm indifference of a man grown weary from long, unendurably arduous fighting and ready to take a rest of any kind, even if it be for ever. But all these people, with their different thoughts, remain equally silent, and avoid each other's eyes as they retreat into their various thoughts. And the silence becomes unendurable and one wants to say something—how sorry one feels, how an ice-cold fire of vengeance burns in one's heart, and many, many things that the word "killed" arouses. But there is nothing that one can say that does not sound empty and insipid, and so the silence continues as all wait for the first to speak.

Voronin sighed and, rustling his map, took another keen look at it. Then he closed his eyes as if checking that all paths and slopes were imprinted on his mind. Bykov listened to the sound of the engines and apparently detected a new note that displeased him, for he stood up and quickly left for the engine-room. Reshetnikov glanced at his watch and rose too.

"I've got to go to the bridge, Comrade Major," he said, reaching for his cap.

"But what about the cocoa?"

"It's grown dark."

"When do you expect to arrive?"

"In three hours' time, providing we don't run into any opposition."

"I haven't asked you who's coming in the boat with us."

"Our boatswain, Leading Seaman Khazov, and able seaman Artiushin, the helmsman. They are men you can count on; they've made several trips."

Lunikov reflected.

"Could you send the boatswain to me if he's up? I'll have a talk with him about the best way of handling everything."

"Certainly. He'll be down in a minute to have supper with my number one," said Reshetnikov not very cordially.

Lunikov glanced at him, made another mental note, and said with that winning gentleness he had used when he spoke about Zhadan and the soup:

"Now, there's nothing to worry about, Comrade Lieutenant. I'm not going to meddle in your business. I'm just interested to get to know him a little. After all we're putting our lives into his hands and not only our lives—the success of our mission. So I'm interested to see who...."

He spoke as if in self-justification and Reshetnikov felt himself drawn even more to this calm, greying man.

"Our boatswain's not much of a talker, he's Bykov's sort. But have a shot, anyway," he smiled and, moving to the door, almost collided with Zhadan bringing in a teapot and a dish.

"Why, where are you going, Comrade Lieutenant?" exclaimed Zhadan. "Here's your cocoa."

"We'll drink the cocoa later on, Comrade Zhadan," said Reshetnikov, putting on his cap. "We'll see our visitors ashore and then drink it. But in the meantime you see they have all they want."

He closed the door behind him and stood in the corridor at the foot of the companion-way until his eyes adjusted themselves to the darkness that awaited him on the other side of the hatchway.

## CHAPTER SIX

It was quite dark on the bridge. The southern night had quickly driven below the horizon what remained of the light, and sky and sea were merged in the general darkness that surrounded the sloop. But while at first the darkness seemed to him impenetrable beginning at the very tips of his eyelashes, as though his face were pressed up to a soft wall mak-

ing him want to screw up his eyes tight, later on, when he had stood for a little on the bridge, that wall imperceptibly vanished, melted. The sea and the sky separated. The darkness acquired volume, became alive, and the night unfolded before him in its tranquil, silent splendour.

The vast dome of the sky was in constant movement from the ceaseless twinkling of the stars. Their brilliance kept varying, giving the impression that they were changing places. The Milky Way, its long shimmering nebula spanning the entire firmament, also seemed to be rocking as within it some transformation moved silently through successive stages: the outlines of its bluish haze changed incessantly, a pale glow would intensify in one part, followed by a gentle irradiation somewhere else. In the proper sense of the word there was no real darkness in the sky, except where starless chasms gaped dark and bottomless. All the rest of the vault of heaven twinkled, flared up, sparkled and danced with the lively, playful lights of remote and innumerable stars.

In the wonderful light of the dark southern sky Reshetnikov's eyes soon became accustomed to the sea. It was difficult to distinguish it from the sky on the horizon because the stars did not shine so brightly in the dense lower levels of the atmosphere as in the clear heights, and this made the sky look like a continuation of the sea itself. Near to the ship the dark oily mass of the water was distinguishable and he could discern the even roll of the low waves with the reflection of starlight on their surface. The breeze, which had grown a little stronger with the night, moved invisibly over the water and the whole glimmering, breathing darkness seemed to be living its own secret life, oblivious of the cockle-shell of a ship scurrying along on its own business.

Reshetnikov stood for a long while on the bridge. The stream of cold air buffeting his face, sneaking up his sleeves and under his collar, did not chill his body; it awoke in him a peculiar, fresh sense of energy which made him feel pleasantly alert and wide-awake. For some time it seemed to him

that everything was going well: the trip could not but be successful. So vast and calm was the light that suffused the sky, the air and the sea, so sublime was the silence that reigned over the waters, that the war, which at any moment might come smashing in with the fiery spout of an exploding mine or the yellow burst of gunfire, seemed something improbable, unsubstantial.

But soon this complete and almost blissful feeling of calm disappeared and he noticed that the night was not so fine, after all. The persistent white foam of the sloop's wake was too clearly visible astern. True, on deck practically nothing was distinguishable, but those objects that were outlined against the starlit sea—both guns, the gunners in their heavy coats, the boat in the stern—were visible by the greater intensity of their darkness. That meant that the outline of the sloop itself would be visible to an outsider.

The nearer they sailed to places where they might meet the enemy the lighter the night seemed to grow, though anyone except Reshetnikov would have called it pitch-dark. He reflected with vexation that this shamelessly light planetarium was highly suitable for pleasure trips but quite unsuitable for wartime with secret missions to be fulfilled. For that, a good cover of clouds is much more suitable. Then it would be really dark. Better still a steady downpour of cold rain to keep the Germans in their dugouts. And if he were in charge of the elements he would gladly have exchanged the low heaving swell for a good choppy sea to muffle the throb of the motors from listeners on shore as the sloop came in.

As a matter of fact, the engines were running much quieter now: Reshetnikov's first order on reaching the bridge had been to quieten them. The deafening fusillade of the exhaust gases stopped, for now they gurgled reluctantly below the surface, and over the dark sea the engines sent no more than a low-pitched steady throb. However, it prevented any sounds of enemy engines reaching the sloop and Reshetnikov called chief signaller Ptakhov (the man

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with "sniper's sight") to the bridge, warned the gunners to keep a sharp look-out, and then took another turn round the deck to check the black-out. Not a glint of light showed from the tightly shut portholes or the hatchways; only on the bridge a vague, pale circle of light could just be seen; it was the glow of the illuminated disk of the compass.

The night enveloped Reshetnikov with its keen freshness but he did not put on his sheepskin: at any moment they might meet enemy patrol boats or coastal defence ships and then the heavy coat would prove an encumbrance. The possibility of meeting the enemy roused his anxiety and he looked fixedly into the darkness. Several times his heart faltered when he thought he saw some outline darker than the sea, many times he was on the point of ordering a change of course and forestalling the enemy's broadside. But every time the outline dissolved and vanished, and he realized that it had been a figment of his tired eyes and taut nerves. At last he caught himself repeating his orders to the look-outs to watch the horizon more attentively, and shamefacedly admitted to himself that he was getting jumpy and fussy. He had to pull himself together, trust Ptakhov and turn his mind to some other subject so as to save his eyes and nerves for the real encounter, not an imaginary one. He bent over the compass to see how steady a course they were keeping and this diverted his thoughts.

Until recently Reshetnikov, the convinced gunnery officer, had no warm feelings towards the compass. He even felt a faint contempt for this feeble instrument whose nerves could not stand routine gunfire. Fancy that, the firing "changed the magnetic state of the sloop" and afterward the compass readings showed God knows what—rainfall figures for the Arctic or the price of tangerines in Batumi. There was nothing to be done but ask the flotilla navigator to use his wizardry with the compass again and get rid of the deviation he had eliminated quite recently. But since he had taken command of the sloop and spent long hours alone with the compass in the vast, empty sea, in fog and in the darkness,

he had made friends with it and learned to respect it. The compass became a part of his captain's ego, a new sensitive organ—that of marine orientation—as necessary and integral a part of him as an arm, an eye or an ear. That was why, on putting out to sea, he always carried out a meticulous inspection of the compass and why, recalling the theory of deviation and other aspects of the science of compasses forgotten even when at college, he one day surprised the flotilla navigator by asking to be allowed to adjust SK 0944's compass himself. There was nothing surprising about that: feeling the compass to be a part of his own organism, Reshetnikov wanted to manage it with the freedom and agility he managed his thoughts and gestures. And, since that day, the compass had become still nearer and dearer and more intelligible to him, something like a living person whom he was helping out of a serious illness.

And now, as he looked at the pale blue disk of the compass face, which seemed to be reflecting the glow of the night sky, Reshetnikov again found himself thinking of it in this way—as something small and feeble, though wonderfully persevering and strong-willed.

In fact, six tiny match-sized magnetic needles carrying a cardboard dial with degrees printed on it were surrounded by a mass of metal enormous in comparison. The deckhouse, the guns, the engines were all pulling these magnets to themselves in one way or another, but the compensators, ingeniously arranged under the compass card to counteract the harmful influence of the ship's iron, were pulling at them with equal strength in an opposite direction. This invisible double vortex of lines of magnetic strength provided a dense shield between the compass card and the North Magnetic Pole located in the Arctic near the coast of North America, some fifteen thousand kilometres from where the sloop lay. What an astonishing thing it was that the compass could respond to its distant, barely detectable command: whichever way the ship with its mass of iron swung, the compass stubbornly pointed to that distant pole in the north.

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It was, above all, this persistence that struck Reshetnikov whenever he thought about the compass. What a fine thing to have that in oneself, the same persistence as "lambda H" (as the directing force of the earth's magnetism on the ship is called).

It always seemed to Reshetnikov that he lacked that guiding force—a clear sense of purpose, the ability to strive for one's aim without hesitation. That is why he envied—with all the ardour of youth eagerly seeking an example for himself in life—anybody whom he suspected of having a surplus of "lambda H," and why he did his best to draw close to them so that he could learn from them how to awaken that great guiding force in himself. Just now he was specially impressed by Major Lunikov: judging from everything, this man must have that "lambda H" in him. And if it had been possible, he would have gone straight to the wardroom to try to speak to Lunikov on this vital subject.

The sea, ships, voyages, battles and storms, the close companionship of a crew—all this was very near and dear to him. He knew definitely that if for some reason or other he should be deprived of it he would be the unhappiest man on earth. Yet at the same time he suspected that in the event of such a misfortune his life would not be quite empty. Now, for the others he saw around him—for men like Vladykin or Senior Lieutenant Kalitin, the commander of his pair, or for boatswain Khazov, it would mean losing the very essence of life: they were the real fighting sort, while he, it seemed, only acted that way in front of others—and in front of himself, for that matter.

This feeling worried him, especially during the first few weeks of his command, when he felt acutely aware of his own shortcomings as captain of the sloop. He began to be haunted by a bitter conjecture that he was really not a proper fighting-man and that the vision of his future that had come to him six years before on the green slopes of the Altai was no more than a misleading, delusive dream.

He arrived at this conjecture every time he started think-

ing about the future and calculating what his role in it was to be. For many of those around him the future was obscured in the ruddy mists of war—for them it was summed up in one concept, the victory they so passionately desired. But for him the conflagrations and explosions of war cast a revealing light on that future that lay beyond victory. What that future was to be he could not now imagine, he could only conjecture that something vast, happy and joyful lay ahead: life! The question was what was he going to do in that new life of peace when towns would be built and not destroyed, when metal would be used to till the soil and not to pit it with hideous shell-holes, when flames would warm people and not consume them, and when the human mind would turn away from destruction to creation.

If, as he suspected, he lacked the qualities of a fightingman, perhaps his real place would be there in that vast and joyful work of construction. And yet, perhaps he was destined to be one of those who, having mastered the use of arms, would have to defend the labour of those many others who would set about building that wonderful new post-war world. It was unlikely that eternal peace would be established when the war ended; someone would have to remain under arms in readiness to fight again for the happiness of an enormous number of people. But would he then be able to say without deceiving himself or others: "Yes, I am a man who will spend the rest of his life determinedly doing just that—defending his country and its labour—that is my calling, my pride, my happiness"?

In short, Reshetnikov was in the throes of that malady which, like measles, capable and thoughtful young men have to go through: doubts about whether he has chosen the right path in life.

These were all vague but complicated, important questions which he could only discuss with a friend, that is, with someone to whom he could confide what was most secret and dear to him, without being afraid of making a fool of himself, someone to whom he could speak not in

words but in thoughts—thoughts not always clearly defined or carried to their conclusion, but, all the same, understandable. He had not yet found a friend of this sort in his life; and whenever he met someone he asked himself whether this was the friend he was looking for.

He thought he had found such a friend when he first met Vladykin; that was why at their first talk he had revealed his dreams about the sloops so quickly and willingly. But after being in Vladykin's flotilla for a time he saw that although he could go a long way with him the main thing was missing. He could talk openly and simply with Vladykin about everything that concerned the ship, of the Navy, or fighting operations, or tactics, as if Vladykin was not a captain and his superior officer but a real friend who understood him and responded to his moods, one who being older had more experience of life. But once when they were sitting together in Vladykin's cosy little room which like everything about Vladykin was extraordinarily clean, neat and gay-looking (specially noticeable in the half-ruined sanatorium where the headquarters were located), Reshetnikov took it into his head to raise his problem and hesitantly mentioned the distant aim of his life. Vladykin arched his brows.

"What's this you want to see? Victory—there's your aim for you."

"Oh, I can see that all right," said Reshetnikov, in agony at not being able to express an idea so important to him. "We shall achieve victory, that's certain, but what comes afterwards? We shall have to go on living after that, won't we? What I mean is, what way to go in life?"

He repeated this favourite expression of his because it exactly expressed the concept of a direction, a course to be taken, and he hoped that Vladykin would grasp his meaning at once so that he could speak to him about everything.

But Vladykin burst out laughing.

"What are you getting at with your 'What way to go in life'? The meaning of man's life, eh? Look here, Reshetnikov, let's get on with the war and leave philosophy till later on. There's only one thing to think about now—victory. Understand?"

Reshetnikov sighed and to avoid argument said he understood; and so he was left alone once again with his problems, which looked so strange and odd to others. But it happened that on the very ship where his main concern was to learn to be an efficient captain and to fight well he found a man whom in his heart of hearts he could call a friend: Nikita Petrovich Khazov, the boatswain.

This did not happen at once. On the contrary, at first his relations with Khazov did not look at all like being friendly.

Somehow he could not rid himself of the impression made on him at their first meeting when he had read in the boatswain's eyes a verdict against himself. During his first week in command of the sloop he thought that Khazov's taciturnity and constant glumness contained a reproach and that the boatswain was unwilling to make friends and was only waiting patiently for the happy day when a real captain would step on board. Later, when from his cabin he chanced to overhear a conversation between Khazov and the chief engineer, and caught the boatswain saying in his usual grumpy manner: "What if he does fuss? Give the man a chance to settle down...," this feeling diminished.

But soon vanity suggested another painful thought: it looked as if not he but Khazov was in command of the sloop. The ship was still under repair after the battle in which Paramonov had been killed and there were a hundred and one things to be thought of: how to get hold of the compressor they needed; whether to use the occasion to change the damaged propeller shaft or go on with their "ague"; how to get the crew fed punctually (the sloop lay in the corner of the bay, far from the general mess); what to do about painting the hull; whether to wait for Sizov, the wireless operator, to come out of hospital or apply for his replacement. And everything that he as captain ought to

envisage or order himself was prompted or actually done by Khazov. True, Khazov was always the soul of tact and spared Reshetnikov's vanity by dressing up his advice and suggestions in the guise of questions which edged his commander to the right answer. But that made things no easier: Reshetnikov felt himself totally unnecessary in the ship.

This feeling soon became humiliating and added its influence to those desperate thoughts that haunted Reshetnikov during the night when he felt he would never become a real captain. And those thoughts pursued him with more and more persistence until, at last, they turned into a night-mare.

Reshetnikov dreamed he was making his first trip on SK 0944 and facing his first engagement with the enemy. The boatswain stood beside him on the bridge and in an extraordinary whisper which was audible above the throb of the engines and the barking of the guns kept telling him what to do: "Over to starboard ... all three engines at Stop ... now give her the port engine alone and swing her over hard...." And the sloop, twisting and turning, actually dodged the bombs which came screaming down, only to fall far from her. And before it had occurred to him that he ought to order the guns to open fire on the second plane Khazov has taken over the machine-gun himself and without waiting for orders was blazing away, while his voice, still in that stage whisper, which apparently none of the crew could hear, prompted him again: "Full speed ahead with all three engines. Hard a-starboard." And Reshetnikov felt that was the only thing. All the same, he terribly much wanted to do something on his own. Mustering all his willpower he wrenched the telegraph handle over to Full Speed Astern, but at once was horrified to see Bykov pop out of the engine-room hatchway and wag his finger at him as if he were a naughty little boy; the boatswain smiled, shook his head and pointed to a bomb that was not so much falling as floating slowly down the sky to its inevitable rendezvous with the stern of the ship. He realized he ought to signal Full Speed Ahead but stood bewitched, powerless to move his hand. At that moment the boatswain, who was watching the bomb intently, casually made a cryptic gesture with his fingers (understood by all except Reshetnikov, because everybody smiled with relief), whereupon, although the screws were spinning in reverse, the ship took a sudden great leap forward and the bomb fell short of the stern. The explosion woke Reshetnikov up; with thumping heart he decided he was losing his senses. However, catching the sound of distant anti-aircraft fire he realized that something really was going on aloft.

Half-clad as he was, he hurried on deck. His first impression was that a heavy air-raid was in progress. On such occasions the sloops were under standing orders to put out from the jetties and disperse for safety. Searchlights criss-crossed the sky, anti-aircraft guns boomed on shore, and on the cape, about five hundred metres from the ship, rose a tall pillar of flame; it looked as though one of the little log cottages that clung to the mountain side around the bay had caught fire. Near the engine-room hatchway he noticed a shadowy figure whom he took for Bykov.

"Which of the engines can you get going, Comrade Bykov? One will be enough as long as you're quick about it," he shouted without hesitation.

"It's me, Comrade Lieutenant," replied a voice he recognized as Khazov's.

Moving forward he saw the boatswain standing next to his machine-gun and watching the sky.

"There goes another mine," Khazov said in his deliberate objective manner, as if he had not noticed Reshetnikov's excitement. "Look, Comrade Lieutenant, that one's being carried to the coast too.... That's a fool they've got flying tonight, it's the second mine he's wasted. He's not making allowance for the wind."

Sure enough, a white parachute—a mere point of brightness in the beam of the searchlight, was drifting slowly

towards the mountain beyond the cape. Reshetnikov shame-facedly realized that this was no air-raid but the usual call paid by one or two planes to sow mines in the entrance to the bay. He also surmised that the boatswain's unusual sociability could only have one motive: an oblique attempt to show his commanding officer how absolutely unnecessary it was to start the engines since everything was in order.

The mine landed somewhere on the mountain side. Its explosion shook the sloop from stem to stern. Reshetnikov forced a yawn.

"Well, there's no point in watching this, it's cold up here," he said, turning to go below. "It's only mines."

But Khazov went on with that suspicious volubility and in that same objective tone:

"There's another plane up there. It's probably got mines to sow too. . . . Look how clear the fairway's showing, Comrade Lieutenant."

Once again Reshetnikov felt the other's prompting: he ought to stay on deck. From where they lay the fairway was seen more clearly than from the base, and they were in a position to spot where the parachutes had dropped and, in the morning, to report to Vladykin and thus help the mine-sweeping that would follow this visit in the night.

With clenched teeth he stood beside Khazov watching the sky for the gleam of a parachute caught in the searchlights; everything within him revolted and boiled at the thought that his latest lesson was, as usual, deserved. The only thing left for him to do himself was to call Artiushin to the bridge and have him lift the dome off the compass and take the bearings of the parachutes as they fell. The boatswain, continuing to pay no attention to Reshetnikov's state of mind, stood beside him in silence. Then he turned to a signaller who was standing idle by the machine-gun and said to him quietly: "Bring the commander's coat."

"Don't bother, I'm warm enough," Reshetnikov snapped, sensing that the boatswain was smiling in the darkness and

shaking his head just the way he had done in his night-mare. That nightmare was being prolonged in reality. Reshetnikov suddenly found himself on the point of giving orders for fire to be opened—which would have been quite useless against a plane flying high in the dark sky—for no other reason except to show that he and not the boat-swain was in charge of the ship. The night was very cold and he felt really chilly in his light coat, but he stubbornly remained on deck until the planes had made off.

After reporting the bearings of the mines to headquarters, he went back to his cabin and lay down under his coat. Then, when he had warmed up, he tried to think calmly about what was really the matter between him and Khazov, and how to get out of a situation which was becoming unbearable.

It was a hell of a situation!

To ask that Khazov be transferred to another sloop would be unfair to the man and, besides, positively bad for the sloop and its crew: they'd never find another boatswain with his experience and knowledge. To raise the question of his own transfer would mean plunging deeper into the psychological abyss of his nightmares and would, probably, arouse Vladykin's mistrust and derision. And if he were to tell Vladykin frankly and honestly that something had gone wrong with the command of the sloop and that, for that reason, he was asking to be sent back to a larger ship—well, that would be sheer capitulation. Besides, to make such a request just before the repairs were completed (which meant before starting to make trips and operations) would arouse suspicions of a nature the very idea of which made Reshetnikov blush.

There was only one other way out of the mess—an unusual but quite just way: that was to ask Vladykin to promote Khazov to the rank of lieutenant and give him the command of SK 0944, which he knew through and through, having studied every member of the crew as closely as himself. After all, such things were not unknown in the

Navy, when, without any red tape, and even without exams, petty officers had received lieutenant's rank during or immediately after an operation.

This idea appealed to him and for a long time he wondered how he could persuade Vladykin to hand over SK 0944 to the man who could really replace Senior Lieutenant Paramonov and to transfer Reshetnikov himself to another sloop. The idea seemed so logical and convincing that he grew quite cheerful and fell to sleep with his mind made up to speak to Vladykin about the matter the next day, while reporting to him on the night observations.

Accordingly, after completing his report on the parachutes next morning, he explained that the idea of taking the bearings of the mines was not his but Khazov's, and that Khazov had all the training necessary to be an officer and for that reason was hard to get on with because he felt cramped in his job as boatswain, and that he could easily be promoted. In that way he reached the subject of his own relations with Khazov and was soon pouring out his complaints quite frankly.

Vladykin listened with sympathetic attention; he even smiled when Reshetnikov, to back up his case, produced two or three examples where his self-esteem had been specially wounded.

"I had an old fellow like that torturing me in my time too," said Vladykin, offering Reshetnikov his cigarette case, a gesture which according to flotilla etiquette meant the conversation had ceased to be official. "In my case though it wasn't the boatswain but a chief helmsman, Rodin. I thought I was cock o' the walk as far as navigation was concerned and there was he giving me lessons in it.... What lessons they were, too, heavens above! I blush to think of them now.... And that old devil did it all so obliquely and tactfully, too, there wasn't the slightest thing to complain of.... But tell me, how does your chap behave when there are other people about? Does he go on teaching you then?"

"No," admitted Reshetnikov and, to his own surprise, suddenly sneezed. Struggling with a handkerchief he added, with a touch of pride: "I wouldn't stand for that..."

"Good fellow," said Vladykin approvingly. Reshetnikov lowered his eyes modestly.

"I understand, Comrade Captain."

"Oh, I don't mean you," Vladykin laughed drily. "You, forgive me, are only a youngster, and a silly ungrateful one at that. You ought to thank heaven for such a boatswain, and here you are. . . . Your self-esteem indeed! Self-esteem, as I see it, isn't damaged when a man teaches you how to do something, your self-esteem should be making you want to learn all the quicker how to do it yourself so that you could never make a fool of yourself. . . . And why, may I ask, should you have such a high opinion of yourself? Do you feel so important? Or so self-confident? In the Navy, my dear fellow, it's a rule that an officer learns from everybody—from his superior officers as well as from his subordinates. Even admirals keep their ears open to what old seamen have to say. The sea doesn't like over-confidence!"

"I'm not trying to avoid learning things, Comrade Captain," said Reshetnikov, surprised at Vladykin's asperity. "And I'm not over-confident, on the contrary...."

He sneezed again at what, this time, seemed an apt moment; it, at least, gave him time to reflect that this was not a very suitable moment to raise the subject of the disappearance of his hopes of becoming anything like a real captain. "On the contrary," he said, changing his words before they left his mouth, "I am very grateful to him for his support.... The only thing I'm afraid of is that I'll get so used to him helping me that I shan't be able to take a step without him later on."

"Well, you won't be much good if that happens," Vladykin said calmly. "In my opinion, if a man's got any guts he'll learn as quickly as possible how to paddle his own canoe." Reshetnikov was delighted to find the conversation taking the course he had hoped for; but Vladykin went on:

"How d'you think I got rid of my Rodin, for instance? How shall I put it.... Pattern firing, so to speak. I'd see him standing looking at the sounding machine, let's say, and my heart would sink. I'd know the old devil had noticed something and that in a moment he'd be rubbing my nose in it. So in despair I'd issue an order: 'Comrade Chief Helmsman, dismantle the sounding machine, grease the wire and give the drum a coat of paint. Just look at the state it's in.' In other words, pattern firing: one of your shots is bound to find the mark. Sure enough, he was going to suggest greasing the wire, but he was too late: the initiative was with me, not with him. So that's the way I got used to being decisive. And I learned to notice everything. I'd go about thinking: will he notice it before I do? But why are you sneezing all the time?" he asked, looking hard at Reshetnikov. "Caught cold last night, I suppose. Underdressed on deck, eh?"

"No, it wasn't that," said Reshetnikov, burying his face in a handkerchief: there was no point in confessing to his pigheadedness about his coat.

"What you need is a stiff tot of vodka, before you turn in tonight, and mustard in your socks; that'll get rid of your cold," advised Vladykin, always ready with an answer. "So, you see.... Be bolder, use more initiative. Don't hesitate over little things; decide quickly. You needn't be afraid of making mistakes over trivial matters, there's not much harm done, and that way you'll learn to decide the big things more boldly.... Anyway, Khazov will correct your mistakes, and tactfully and carefully, I bet. It's better he should correct them than go on giving you advice, isn't it? And don't be offended: he'd be doing for you what a good Communist ought to do for a Komsomol member, and an experienced sailor for ... well, let us say, for a young sailor like you. Now, what else do you want?"

Reshetnikov was about to say that he wanted much more:

to feel in himself that boldness, decisiveness and self-assurance that Vladykin had recommended him to acquire. But that would have meant going into those night thoughts which he should on no account talk about, since to do so would finish him off completely in Vladykin's eyes. However, feeling that the conversation was going to lead nowhere and that he would have to return to the sloop where Khazov and all the unpleasantnesses that went with him were awaiting him, he looked up and said:

"I do have a suggestion, Comrade Captain. Perhaps, you'd agree to...."

"Is it your own idea or another of the boatswain's suggestions?" asked Vladykin with a bright smile.

"Oh, this is my own idea," Reshetnikov replied seriously and unfolded his plan. But as the talked, the cogency and logic of that plan faded with the smile on Vladykin's face.

"I see," said Vladykin, when he had finished, and lit a cigarette slowly. Then, snapping his lighter shut and looking hard at Reshetnikov, he said: "So you want to retreat."

"No. But any other sloop...."

"On another sloop it would be the chief engineer or somebody else who'd get on your nerves. You'd be changing sloops like choosing a pair of boots, looking for ones that didn't pinch your feet, eh? H'm, I can see that suggestion's your own, all right."

Reshetnikov felt the colour mounting to his cheeks and realized with despair that he had only one resort left: to give up and ask to be sent back to the cruiser.

"Very well, then," Vladykin said abruptly. "I'll put the

cards on the table, it'll be clearer to you then."

He glanced aside as if wondering how to begin; Reshetnikov was all ears.

"What interested me about you was that I felt you really loved the sloops. Remember how you told me about 0519? As I said then, it's good when a man is so sure what he wants to do. But I don't see that assurance in you now.

And, probably, it will soon be all the same to me whether there's such a person as Lieutenant Reshetnikov in the world or not... But that's neither here nor there. Now, listen to me. You dreamed of the sloops and thought one of them would be handed to you on a platter. That, of course, doesn't happen. I had a word about you with the Rear-Admiral—your bearing in the battle on SK 0519 showed you had something in you. We gave you time to get used to sloops. After all, you spent four months as a squadron gunnery officer, and that meant mastering the tactics and technique, which I know you did pretty well. Then we had that incident ... with Paramonov...."

He fell silent and Reshetnikov realized what a loss Paramonov's death had been for the flotilla commander. Then Vladykin raised his eyes and looked Reshetnikov straight in the face.

"Well, it was this way. Just then I'd been putting a lot of thought into what sloop to give you. Well, I gave you Paramonov's. Have you realized what sort of ship that one is?"

"I have," replied Reshetnikov quietly.

"I know you have. And thank you for hanging up that picture. . . ." Vladykin smiled wrily. "You were talking about learning. You taught me much with that picture. I gave orders for the flotilla to start the tradition of hanging up pictures of their fallen heroes on every sloop. A memorial to their fighting. . . ."

He again faltered.

"Why do you think I decided to give you that sloop? It wasn't only because you'd find it easier to go into your first engagement on her—not as an occasional performer but as a real captain. It was because Nikita Petrovich Khazov is boatswain on her. I put you into hands I could trust, and what hands! But you..."

He did not complete his phrase, for he noticed that Reshetnikov's face had hardened: the reproach had evidently sunk in. He opened a drawer in the desk and drew out a file labelled "Reports to Rear-Admiral" with the unobtru-

sive trimness and elegance that marked everything about Vladykin.

"And because of you I postponed Khazov's promotion. You ought to know that too, now that we're talking seriously. Read that."

Reshetnikov picked up the sheet of paper. It was an order of the day drawn up at the base, announcing that for displaying outstanding military qualities Leading Seaman N. P. Khazov had been appointed number one in SK 0944 with the rank of petty officer. The order bore the name of the previous month but was undated and unsigned.

"If Paramonov had returned alive that would have been signed, you see," said Vladykin, taking the sheet of paper back. "But when ... when that happened to him and your name arose I proposed to the Rear-Admiral that the order be delayed. It's one thing being second-in-command to Paramonov, quite another when it's you. You have nothing to teach him and, to start with, you couldn't help him at all. And besides, it's better for you the way it is: as boatswain he gives you more than he could as your second-incommand. As boatswain he's a king, but he'd only be a chicken himself as number one. And it's better for the ship too, for otherwise both the captain and his second-in-command would be learning the ropes, and the new boatswain would have to get used to the crew. That way we wouldn't have a ship at all, it'd be an incomplete secondary school. . . . And then, if we were to make an officer of him and leave him as your boatswain all the effect would be lost. The idea of this promotion is to pep up the boatswains in all the sloops, to give 'em a bit of pride in themselves; so they'd say, see the way our fellows jump up to the bridge! And they'd work all the happier for it. You see?"

"I do," said Reshetnikov agitatedly.

The way Vladykin had for a second lifted a corner of the curtain concealing a world unknown to him—a world where the lives of servicemen were decided—and that he had been given a glimpse of what lay behind that small

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sheet of paper, affected him strongly. And it was in a new light that he saw Vladykin and the Rear-Admiral and Khazov and the whole close-knit collective of his ship's company and all that intelligently calculated course of naval service where everything is weighed, where every man has his own peculiar worth and where for the sake of the fighting fitness of a single ship the fate of each individual is indissolubly bound with the fate of others.

Vladykin seemed to notice his agitated state, for he gave him time to think over what he had just learned. Without haste he placed the order back in the folder and said:

"It's good if you see what I mean. I've told you about all this business so that you'll understand one important thing. You've got your relations with Khazov into a mess and you're making two mistakes that are unpardonable in a captain. Your vanity prevents you seeing Khazov as a human being. Why, the boatswain ought to be the best friend the captain of a sloop has. Otherwise the ship won't sail or fight. But what do you know about Khazov except that he gets on your nerves? You're so wrapped up in yourself you don't find anything in him to interest you. What's he got on his mind? Why is he so surly and unsociable? You don't care a damn about that. You just don't want to find the way to getting to know him. That's your first mistake."

Vladykin placed the folder in the drawer and turned the key in the lock.

"Secondly, you've put Khazov between you and everybody else in the ship, every one of them. And how, may I ask, are you going to command your ship in action if you don't know your own men—who they are, how they live, how they hate the fascists? Which of them you can send to his death when that's needed to save the ship, and which you'd better keep an eye on in battle. Which of them you can help with a friendly word and which are better sworn at. Do you know all that? Of course you don't, yet you've been on board for a fortnight. If the Rear-Admiral and the Flotilla

Commander were as little interested in people as you are, Khazov would have stuck as a boatswain for the rest of his life and you'd still be on the cruiser dreaming of sloops. That's your second mistake."

Vladykin rose to his feet and, through force of habit, at once straightened his tunic, though it fitted him without a crease. Reshetnikov stood up too: Vladykin's gesture signified that the conversation had become official again.

"So here it is, Comrade Lieutenant," Vladykin said drily. "You will remain in command of SK 0944 and Khazov will remain boatswain there. It depends on you when he will be promoted and become your number one. And whether he'll stay on SK 0944 or be transferred to another sloop also depends on you. Understand?"

"I understand, Comrade Captain. May I go?"

"Yes, if you really understand."

There was not a glimmer of a smile or a trace of warmth in Vladykin's eyes. Reshetnikov realized that now he was being addressed without any allowance being made for his youth or his lack of experience. He felt wretchedly confused. For the first time in his life he felt that the fate of others depended on how he acted and he could not cope at all with this unfamiliar feeling which weighed so heavily on his heart. He had, somehow, grown up during that conversation.

"May I ask you a question, Comrade Captain?" he said, raising his eyes to Vladykin's. His voice sounded agitated. "Does Khazov know about that order?"

"I doubt if he knows," replied Vladykin in the same frigid tone. "But I'm sure he's guessed. Everything was pointing that way, and he's no child."

"Then how am I to deal with him, now that he..." began Reshetnikov, and suddenly sneezed again, ridiculously, stupidly.

Vladykin did not smile, but a spark of unconcealed laughter shone in his eyes and Reshetnikov saw all was not lost.

"You certainly must put some pepper in that vodka; it'll be more effective," said Vladykin. "This is no time to fall ill. D'you understand?"

But Reshetnikov walked to the door without replying this time that he understood; one thing he certainly did understand: that Khazov had become an altogether different man to him.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

This talk had the effect of a cold shower on Reshetnikov. All his "nocturnal psycho-analysis," as he now dismissed his recent heart-searchings, seemed to him schoolboy nonsense. So much precious time lost! For an entire fortnight he had been ponderously solving the problem whether to be or not to be a captain instead of just setting about being one. He at once took a mental oath to start from that very day behaving like a grown-up man and, above all, to change his distrustful attitude to the boatswain who must, in all probability, be feeling offended.

The steady breeze, blowing keenly off the sea, felt cold and the sun shone without imparting any warmth, though so bright and strong that the air was transparently clear. The path leading to the head of the bay where SK 0944 lay wound among low-branched trees which had not yet turned green. Through the black lace of the bare, dry branches a strange impression was made by the white plaster figures with volley-balls or oars in their hands—a reminder that this had once been the park of a sanatorium. Its houses now showed gaping window-frames or simply lay on the ground in pathetic heaps of bricks and beams. But beyond the dark boughs and the ruined walls, now to the left, now to the right, now straight ahead, depending on how the path twisted, lay the sea. The sea from which he could not escape and to which he was bound to come whichever way his path through life should turn, however much it might be concealed from him by a network of thoughts and doubts.

But although the air held a fresh, sobering clarity, Reshetnikov's mind became no clearer. On the contrary, his utter ignorance of how he was going to manage with Khazov, with the sloop and, in general, with the sea and the Navy filled him with anxiety.

And, as if in response to his thoughts, the path took a sudden turn and ran uphill, and he found himself facing an expanse of blue so vivid that he stopped.

The mountain, its slopes dotted with cottages, orchards and the buildings of the sanatoria which from afar looked neat and intact, ran steeply down to the sea, enclosing the bay on three sides. The sea, fretted by the sou'wester, streamed into the bay with strong white-capped rollers. Constricted within the narrow confines of two capes the waves grew higher, curved their backs, broke on the shore and thrust long foaming tongues up the beach. The whole bay was alive with churning, capering movement.

In the middle of the bay a large cargo ship rode evenly at anchor. Closer to the shore the masts of three smokyblue destroyers swung swiftly. Near them the sloops rose and fell on the heaving swell; they lay at anchor a little way from the jetty to avoid bumping against each other. The water near the quayside was alive with a whole pack of motor boats, ketches, trawlers and those little launches nicknamed after motor cars of different makes according to their size; they bounced and bumped against each other like a shoal of little fish. Clumsy-looking sea-planes, long out of the water, squatted on the sand like huge ruffled birds patiently waiting for the wild waves to subside so that they could slide back into calm water, run over it noisily, suddenly tear themselves free and lose their appearance of clumsiness.

The swell was certainly strong and Reshetnikov experienced that already familiar anxiety about his sloop. Recalling, moreover, that the boatswain had left for the base early that morning to get some special paint, he felt

his feet hurry him along the path. However, he took into consideration that the sloop had probably been pulled behind the shelter of an ammunition barge (lucky he'd remembered to leave instructions before going to headquarters) and his anxieties dissolved; turning back to the bay he became engrossed in the movements of the only ship in sight which was not at anchor or tied up.

She was a sloop exactly like SK 0944. She was running at full speed between the capes, thrusting her way through the waves which now and then enveloped her completely in spray; from time to time an exploding depth charge stained the water astern with black and white bubbles. Suddenly a tall column of water spouted enormous and thick quite close to the sloop. The column hung in the air for a second or two like a motionless thick-trunked tree, so powerful and sturdy that the wind, unable to bend it, could only set its black crown tossing. Then a heavy, slow, rolling crash smote the ear and, as if the sound had cut down this fantastic tree, it at once began to totter and its mottled leafy crown collapsed, revealing a bare column of water. And then this too crashed down and scattered to disclose the sloop; Reshetnikov heaved a sigh of relief. The sloop swung round and stubbornly hurled three more depth charges in rapid succession.

This was known as mine-sweeping.

It consisted in dropping depth charges whose explosions were intended to detonate mines so that they would explode clear of the sloop, which in the meantime had managed to get ahead. No one could foresee just where the next mine would explode—some distance from the sloop or right under its hull. That depended as much on chance as on the captain's skill and the speed of the ship. However, in the sloops this operation was considered a mere bagatelle, a tedious routine job that required little attention and which nobody considered of much importance.

But, as Reshetnikov had never been on a sweep, this picture awakened unconcealed envy and a sense of impa-

tience with which he was familiar. He wanted to see his sloop finish repairs as soon as possible and start operational duties. One run like that across the bay stuffed with mines would establish him and show, once and for all, whether Lieutenant Reshetnikov was a captain or merely someone with gold braid on his sleeve. . . . That was where a real captain would prove his worth! There, in a duel with death, with only his will-power to save the ship from destruction, when the slightest hesitation and lack of assurance would be noticed by all, when the shameful thought. . . .

At that moment his face twisted in a grimace and he gave a loud sneeze. A voice he recognized said behind him: "Good health, Comrade Lieutenant...."

He spun round. Khazov came up to him carrying a large tin of paint.

"Thanks," said Reshetnikov in confusion. He came down from the clouds with a bump. The sight of the paint and of the boatswain served to remind him that his "duel with death" still lay a long way off and that in the meantime there were the humdrum tasks of a captain's daily round, not military feats, to be done.

The two men stood without speaking for a time—Khazov being, as usual, uncommunicative, Reshetnikov not knowing what to say after all that Vladykin had told him. He looked out of the corner of an eye at the handsome, somewhat melancholy face of the boatswain, feeling awkward and shy, and it suddenly occurred to him there might be an unexpectedly simple reason for the expression of melancholy pensiveness which he had noticed the first time he saw Khazov: could it be because his own arrival on the sloop had postponed for a long time the fulfilment of Khazov's dream—so near to his grasp—of getting a command himself? Confused feelings of shame, guilt and long-overdue repentance stirred in him, and he turned to Khazov with the heartfelt desire to say something friendly which could be the beginning of a serious talk; but once again.

that irrepressible tickle came to his nose and he lost himself in a mighty reverberating sneeze.

"You've caught cold, Comrade Lieutenant," said Khazov.

Had this happened earlier in the day Reshetnikov would, of course, have considered Khazov's words as the usual lesson, as a jibe: that's what your pigheadedness has brought you to, his remark would have implied. But now he detected something quite different in it—something simple and human and warm-hearted, and to his own surprise he answered:

"That's what comes from not listening to you, Nikita Petrovich. I'm sneezing my head off...."

Everything about this answer was new: the admission of his stubbornness, the very tone, easy and friendly, and the way he was addressing the boatswain for the first time as Nikita Petrovich. And Khazov seemed to understand all that, for he looked at him just as openly and pleasantly, and actually smiled. Reshetnikov smiled too, with a feeling that the wall that had stood between the two of them had come crashing down and that now life was going to be wonderfully easy.

"Captain Vladykin said all I needed was to take a stiff vodka before turning in," he went on smoothly and was surprised to find how simple talking with Khazov was turning out to be. "D'you think it'll help? Some mustard in my socks too, he said."

"Ought to help. But a steam-bath's better," replied Khazov.

And they walked on together to the sloop.

The feeling of happy relief continued to buoy up Reshetnikov's spirits as they walked. Stealing an occasional glance at the boatswain, who was carrying the paint tin gingerly, he asked himself with some surprise what could have changed in Khazov to make him suddenly so approachable. And then he guessed that the change must have taken place not in Khazov but in himself. Strange to say, Khazov no longer put him on his guard or made him feel his pride was about to be injured. On the contrary, he seemed to be listening with unconcealed interest and understanding to the cheerful chatter in which Reshetnikov's high spirits found an outlet. For some reason Reshetnikov told the story of some friends of his who last winter had tried to cure him from flu by the same "medicine" and how the treatment had ended up with the "doctors" passing out completely in a flat on shore while the patient tried to stagger back to the cruiser, only to spend the night in the guardroom instead of in his bunk... As he told the story he looked happily around, drinking in eagerly the sight of the sky and the sea, Khazov and the street of the little town they were passing through.

Everything his eyes fell on—the hideous ruins of the bombed houses, the craters in the road, the lorries churning up the mud, their gears screaming, the soldiers cooking something in a mess-tin over a fire on the steps of a wrecked building, the ships tossing in the bay, the naked poplars bending under the wind which swept the whole sky blue and cold—everything was remarkable and full of interest, appealing to him in a new way and arresting his eyes. At the gates of one house less damaged than the rest stood a sentry wrapped in a huge sheepskin with a shaggy collar. Reshetnikov looked at him with the same lively curiosity.

"Look there, Comrade Khazov! There's a fine structure for you," he said with a laugh, as if he were seeing a sentryman's sheepskin for the first time in his life. Then he fell silent. An unusual idea had crossed his mind. He stopped in front of the sentry and examined him so closely that the fellow became confused and, to be on the safe side, sprang to attention, lowering his enormous sleeves, against which his rifle looked a mere toothpick. Khazov watched the Lieutenant expectantly but Reshetnikov merely clicked his tongue and moved on, beckoning Khazov to follow him.

"What d'you think, Boatswain?" he said with a sly note

of defiance, again addressing Khazov in an unusual way (without the "Comrade"). "What about getting three or four of those coats on the sloop? What would you say to a 'private movable deck-house' like that? It'd be warm and dry and wind-proof, and you could slip it off at any moment. Think of the helmsman with a house like that around him—wouldn't it be fine?"

Khazov looked back, cast his eyes over the sentry and, for the second time on that remarkable day, smiled.

"Everybody would die of laughing at us. The sheepskin's bigger than the sloop itself."

"Let them laugh; it won't keep them from freezing," retorted Reshetnikov firmly and went on with animation: "So that's one for the helmsman, one for the captain, one for the signaller—no, that would be no good, he wouldn't be able to get his hands to the binoculars with those sleeves.... One for you...."

"I don't need one, Comrade Lieutenant, but the watch gunners could do with them..." broke in Khazov, apparently beginning to agree with the idea.

"Quite right, that's another two for the gunners. So we need five of them," said Reshetnikov categorically, pleased to think that he had not used Vladykin's method of "pattern firing" but had registered a clean hit. "Get them from the base tomorrow, and if they won't let you have them I'll go down there myself. But they'll give you them, spring's just round the corner so what's the use of keeping them there?"

The sheepskins turned up punctually on SK 0944 the next day. Immediately the SK 0944 men were nicknamed "night-watchmen," a sally for which Lieutenant Baburchenok, captain of SK 0854 and recognized jester of the flotilla, was responsible. Reshetnikov's relations with Khazov took a sharp turn for the better, as if their walk had been of decisive importance.

As a matter of fact, Khazov went on behaving exactly as before, but now Reshetnikov no longer felt that as an en-

croachment on his will and no longer interpreted Khazov's words of advice as a desire to humiliate the new captain and demonstrate his unfitness for his command. Now he had a whole string of orders to give to the boatswain every morning; and each time, when by the approval he read in Khazov's eyes he realized he had forestalled his advice by his own order, another good idea came to him and his boldness and decisiveness increased.

He felt now like a man who had long been afraid to swim without supports and who, all of a sudden, greatly daring, finds to his surprise that the water is supporting him and that there is absolutely no need to think which arm or leg to move. It was such a wonderful feeling that Reshetnikov, who was gay and vivacious by nature, became still gayer and more sociable; and this proved to be a great help in getting to know the crew of the sloop better.

Another thing that helped was that, because of the refit, the sloop lay a long way from the rest of the flotilla and from that half-ruined sanatorium where, as a change from the cramped quarters on board ship, the crew usually lived between trips. For this reason the crew of SK 0944 lived in the sloop (Bykov obliged by arranging a heating system and even did his best to get electric lighting from the generator of a near-by army headquarters) and Reshetnikov spent whole days with the men. He would come to the engine-room to talk with the engineers, or work on the guns with the gunners, or with the men in charge of the racks of depth charges, or sit in the crew's quarters in the evenings. And in working and talking with them he unwittingly came to know the men better and, despite his constant longing to be out on his first operational trip, in his heart of hearts he felt grateful that the ship was under repair.

During these days he discovered that the twenty men whom till then he had combined in the vague, featureless concept of the "ship's company" were all very different people, each with his own personality, traits of character, habits and points of view, merits and failings; each of them had, before joining the Navy, a "civilian life" Reshetnikov knew absolutely nothing about, though it had been decisive in shaping the man's character. And he found out, too, that a knowledge of the strong and weak side of everyone, and also an understanding of their mutual relations, whether friendly or unfriendly or just neutral, could help him greatly in commanding the sloop.

Of course, this was not a very original idea. And when he stumbled across it in his nocturnal meditations he rightly reflected that there would be no sense in boasting to anybody about his latest "great discovery" and that he would be wiser to keep it for his own use. But the immutability of the ancient truth he had reached in his own mind attracted him and from that time on he used every opportunity to discover the real inner life of each of his men.

Here some remarkable surprises awaited him. It turned out, for instance, that Artiushin—the light-hearted joker, the bright and rather uppish, good-looking fellow who, according to rumours on the sloop, had a countless number of victims among the female population of the base, was in reality going ashore every evening not to visit his latest sweetheart, whom all supposed to be a hospital nurse, but to spend his spare time at the hospital at the bedside of Sizov, the wireless operator (who had been wounded in the same operation where Paramonov lost his life), taking him what meagre delicacies were to be found in the little war-damaged town, and quarrelling desperately with the duty doctor and the orderlies who, he maintained, were denying Sizov the comforts and care he deserved.

Reshetnikov found that out when visiting the hospital himself to get to know Sizov and, incidentally, try to learn from the doctor about whether he should wait for Sizov to recover or apply to the flotilla for another wireless operator. Later, while talking to Artiushin about Sizov, he discovered another important detail: when they were leaving Sevastopol Artiushin had been knocked overboard by blast and could easily have been lost (for the concussion,

he said, "had knocked all the political-moral stuffing out of me" and he was floating "like an unconscious log"), had not Sizov, who jumped into the water after him, grabbed him and kept him afloat until the sloop managed to pick them up.

"So you've been friends ever since?" asked Reshetnikov who thought he understood the psychology of the situation perfectly clearly.

Artiushin looked at him with surprise not unmixed with irony.

"Why d'you think he jumped overboard for me then? We've been friendly a long time, since Odessa."

Reshetnikov felt confused.

"Oh, he's a good fellow," he said for the sake of saying something. "How old is he?"

"Sixteen. He's a good lad. Bit slow in the uptake, though."

"What d'you mean, slow? He wasn't slow in jumping in after you?"

"He did that because he was scared."

"I don't understand," said Reshetnikov.

"He was scared for my sake. He doesn't do a thing for himself. He's so meek it makes you mad. If you don't keep an eye on him it'd be all up with him in a minute. . . . Look, Comrade Lieutenant: yesterday I went to the hospital and found they hadn't given him any of that—er—that sulphidine. The head doctor had ordered it for him but they don't give him it."

Reshetnikov felt ashamed; once again, just as it had been the first time they met, was Artiushin saying things that were a direct reproach: how can you call yourself a captain, he was asking, if you don't know what your sailors need?

"I asked him whether he needed anything and he didn't say anything about that."

"Him say anything!" Artiushin snorted angrily. "In his place I'd have had all the bed-pans in the ward flying about

the place. But he just lies there and doesn't say a word.... You ought to bark at someone there, Comrade Lieutenant, otherwise you'll have to wait a couple of years before you get him back on board."

"I'll see to it," said Reshetnikov. "I'll go there tomorrow."

Artiushin kept quiet for a while and then, averting his eyes, said in a changed voice:

"The boatswain said you were thinking of asking headquarters for a replacement."

"I don't know yet. It depends how he is."

Artiushin raised his eyes.

"It'd be better to wait.... He's a first-rate wireless man, it'd be hard for the ship without him," he said, casting Reshetnikov a winning look, and in his eyes Reshetnikov read that it was less a question of the ship losing a wireless operator than of Artiushin losing a friend.

He smiled.

"I see.... But I thought you said he was slow in the uptake."

"Only when it comes to himself," said Artiushin vivaciously. "But when it comes to the Germans he's the terror of the high seas and an avenger of the people, I'd say he is. First Lieutenant Paramonov recommended him twice—once for Kerch and once for Solenoye Lake. But all he's got is that third-class medal of his. I just can't stand the sight of it; why, it makes you ashamed to look people in the eyes. He ought to get a real decoration for that last engagement—you just ask the boys how he crawled on his belly to give them the shells, with both his legs smashed.... He's got a private account to settle with the fascists."

And he told one of those thousands of tragedies of youth in which the war was so abundant.

In September 1941, SK 0944 was escorting a ship bringing the wounded and civilian evacuees from Odessa. At dawn three squadrons of Junkers—against three sloops—sank the ship and then flew low, raking the sea with machinegun fire to get those who were clinging to the wreckage.

The sloops picked up the survivors. Among them SK 0944 found a lad--with one hand he was holding on to an empty crate, with the other he was supporting above the water the head of a little girl of about ten, trying to let her breathe not realizing that she'd been killed. He sat beside that little soaking wet corpse in the bows all the way to Ak-Mechet, not saying a word, and when the ship reached the landingstage he jumped up and ran off to the other two sloops. After putting the survivors ashore those two sailed for Sevastopol but SK 0944 stayed behind for repairs. Next morning Artiushin saw the lad again; he was sitting on the landing-stage looking silently into the water. At dinner time he was still there, sitting as before, and Artiushin went up to him to take him on board for something to eat. It was then he found the lad's name was Yura Sizov, that the dead girl was his sister and that he had not found either his father or mother among the survivors on the other sloops. His father was being taken to Sevastopol after losing a leg in an air-raid at the factory where he worked. Little Yura was now quite on his own and there was only one thing left for him to do—jump into the sea from which he had not managed to save a single one of his family.

The void that had suddenly opened in Yura's world came as a shock to Artiushin, and he felt seriously concerned about the fixed way the lad was staring at the water as he told his story. He persuaded the Captain not to leave Yura at Ak-Mechet but to take him on to Sevastopol where something might be arranged for him. The repairs took four days and during that time Artiushin "for why he didn't know" grew attached to Yura and found out that he was an amateur short-wave wireless enthusiast with a certificate to his name. So Artiushin went to the Captain again and everything was arranged for the best: Sizov stayed on board as a volunteer and by the spring he was a full-fledged wireless operator and was justifying his presence on the sloop both as a sailor and a radio operator.

There was something so warm-hearted about Artiushin's account of the incident that Reshetnikov found himself wondering how this jester and scoffer whose sharp tongue kept the whole crew scared could be capable of such deep, almost paternal feelings. And as he listened he felt keenly his own loneliness—why hadn't he been fated to have a friend like that, someone who would think about him in that way? He felt on the verge of self-pity but, to his surprise, found his thoughts turning in quite another direction: it would be quite wrong to ask for Sizov's replacement. First, no one knew whom they'd get instead, and Sizov was obviously a good man, and secondly, the separation would certainly affect Artiushin and make him lose his happy disposition (which Reshetnikov valued, considering Artiushin's jokes as necessary "psychological vitamins"), and all that would reduce the ship's fighting capacity.

On reaching this conclusion, Reshetnikov gave himself a mental pat on the back for, at long last, beginning to think like a captain: why, he was thinking quite in the Vladykin manner! He felt so pleased that he at once turned to action. He managed to extract some sulphidine from the army hospital, the recommendation which lay in the files at headquarters took effect, and Sizov received the Red Star medal from Vladykin himself. As for Artiushin, he beamed like a new penny, got through an enormous amount of work, and raised the spirits of the crew during the arduous days of repairs with an unlimited supply of "psychological vitamins."

As is usually the case, Reshetnikov's successes spurred him on, and he took in his stride the task of improving his relations with Chief Engineer Bykov, which had taken a wrong turn within a week of Reshetnikov's taking over the sloop. They had been good at first; the Chief had nothing but praise for the new captain, for Reshetnikov at once came out strongly for the liquidation of the propeller shaft's "fever," on account of which SK 0944, thanks to Lieutenant

Baburchenok, was known in the flotilla as the "butter churn" or the "wagtail." Reshetnikov was even on the point of reporting to the Flotilla Commander on the necessity of putting the sloop on the stocks, but, discovering that this would mean taking her to Poti, categorically refused to raise the "matter" with Vladykin. Bykov scowled and from then on his relations with the new captain turned sour.

True, the situation did not worry Reshetnikov as much as the one which was then developing so unaccountably between him and Khazov, but, all the same, the idea that the chief engineer looked askance at him was disagreeable. For that reason he made every effort to right the sloop's other misfortune and get a new compressor for starting the engines.

This was not easy. At North Base these compressors turned out to be rare objects; moreover, besides SK 0944, three other sloops had damaged compressors. On each visit to headquarters Reshetnikov made a point of calling on the flotilla engineer (whom the captains of the sloops for some reason referred to among themselves without using either his name or title, but just as Fedotych). Fedotych, however, brushed him away in silence as if he were a fly. Anyway, Reshetnikov realized how slender were his chances of getting a compressor. He was in competition against captains of veteran sloops, one of them, furthermore, being Lieutenant Baburchenok who was notorious in the flotilla not only for his mordant wit but also for being an irresistible wangler of everything that was scarce.

To be precise, it was his senior petty officer, Petliayev, who did the wangling. Before being called up from the reserve he used to work as the head of the supply department of a large machine shop and had brought his old habits with him: here in the Navy he soon established contacts everywhere, and knew to a nicety where and when some treasure of a machine part was arriving and also who exactly was in charge of it. At that point Baburchenok

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went into action by obtaining the necessary authorization. Acting on the information provided by Petliayev's reconnaissance, Baburchenok, turning up in Poti, would go to the appropriate office—of a factory manager, of the Assistant Fleet Engineer at Rear Headquarters, or of some depot chief—and receive the necessary permission by working on their psychology or exercising his natural high spirits and remarkable, unique charm.

Sometimes he resorted to another irresistible method of persuasion. This was that Baburchenok, usually so full of life and merry, would go into the office with a hang-dog look on his face and start sighing and complaining bitterly that because some damned washer or miserable carburettor was missing from flotilla base, a fine fighting ship was unable to leave on a vital operation. (When talking with people far removed from the operational life of the Fleet, Baburchenok always dropped cryptic hints about the special importance of these missions, as if the outcome of the next few months of the war depended on them.) While he spoke, his round, animated face with full cheeks like russet apples, between which sat a comically sharp little nose, took on an expression of such tragic misery that the most heartless guardian of rare treasures found it hard to pronounce his usual harsh words of refusal and even felt driven to making excuses. Listening to his clumsy explanations, Baburchenok would nod his head in commiseration and from time to time repeat in heart-broken tones:

"What a terrible shame, and we need it so much.... What can we do about it?"

This naive appeal seemed to possess some hypnotic power for, hearing it for the fifth of sixth time under the gaze of those innocent bright eyes emanating such sad hope and an almost childlike faith in miracles, any warden of precious stores would find himself reaching for a pen, putting pen to paper and automatically writing the magic words—"To be issued as required"—in the top left-hand corner of a form which somehow appeared on the desk....

The remarkable thing was that Lieutenant Baburchenok himself did not really know why he collected all these rare treasures and he went on doing so in a sort of sporting spirit. But Chief Engineer Petliayev well knew how to use them: exchanging with the engineers of other sloops according to the demand—a cotter-pin for an auger, bearing for a carburettor, asbestos sheets for some kind of wrench—he gradually built up a "golden treasury" of materials and tools, thanks to which he could consider himself independent of any accidents with supplies. And discovering (as always, before anybody else) that one, and only one, compressor had been sent from Poti for the whole flotilla Petliayev lost no time in advising his captain what to do to get it for his sloop.

The news reached SK 0944 much later, for she lay under repair some distance from headquarters. A week earlier Reshetnikov would have submitted meekly to the idea of Baburchenok grabbing the first compressor, with Usov and Somov coming next on the list, after which someone would remember SK 0944 with her obscure captain. But in this new state of self-confidence and awareness of success, to which he had now grown accustomed, he was off to headquarters at once. In the tiny office of Andrei Fedotych he found all his three competitors, each of them taking his own line.

Lieutenant Somov, trim and reserved, was trying to get the compressor in full accordance with the established rules. His chief and only weapon were official statements about the complete unsuitability of his compressor, signed by Andrei Fedotych himself.

The second claimant, Lieutenant Usov, a judicious quietmannered young man with two decorations pinned to his tunic, chose a flanking attack: he nobly offered to take his sloop "off the strength," a suggestion that made Andrei Fedotych raise his eyes to him. Then, in the same quiet calm tone Usov explained that the compressor he had was not so bad and that it could be made to run like clock-work

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by a pair of skilful hands, and that if Andrei Fedotych promised to look after it every time the sloop returned to base, he would not ask for a new one. Usov knew very well that Fedotych had struggled with his compressor three times already and, losing his temper, had cursed it for a "perforated primus stove."

Baburchenok had tabled an entirely original proposal. In his opinion it was impossible to decide who needed the compressor most without the participation of the chief engineers of the sloops concerned. They ought to gather with them at a round-table conference and have a good, heart-to-heart talk about it—after all the engineers knew better, didn't the captains merely repeat what they said? Whereupon, screwing up his nose comically, he added that during operational mine-sweeping that morning his sloop had stunned some splendid fish, so he suggested organizing the conference that very evening and invited both his competitors and their chiefs and Fedotych, too, "to partake of a first-class fish soup with Jubilee sauce," a hint at the brandy his wife had sent him from Tbilisi again.

The idea of this conference had been suggested by Petliayev who had already reached agreement with both the other engineers. He had not taken SK 0944 into account because you could not consider its captain seriously. The essence of the agreement lay in the fact that Petliayev was offering the others numerous small but much-needed appliances, tools and materials from his "golden treasury" fund. In exchange they had to promise not only to refrain from quarrelling about the compressor but, on the contrary, to convince their captains that they could make do with the old ones for the time being and that the new one should go to Baburchenok, who would be up the spout without it.

However, neither Somov's documentation, nor Usov's mild subtle ruse, nor Baburchenok's diplomacy produced results. Fedotych, lost in his own thoughts, silently dug into his little tattered notebook, where he kept a record of the tribulations, woes and ailments of all the sloops, and

without hearing Baburchenok out, distractedly waved all three of them away from him.

"Stop that whining and whimpering in here. These are official premises. You muddle my thoughts. This has got to be settled the fair way. I'm going to give the compressor to the one who needs it most."

"That means me, then," Reshetnikov said with a sudden flash of inspiration from behind his competitors. All three turned on him indignantly.

Fedotych narrowed his eyes and looked at him wearily.

"And why you, may I ask?"

"Very simply," Reshelnikov replied firmly. "If you listen a moment, I'm sure you'll agree."

"Have a shot," said Fedotych, looking at Reshetnikov with some interest.

"Now, take the case of First Lieutenant Somov: he's at his last resources; in any case he'll soon have to get his engines overhauled. What does he need a new compressor for now?"

"Granted," Fedotych nodded.

"And Lieutenant Usov is going to have a 'Katyusha' fitted in a few days' time, much to everybody's envy—that means he'll be berthed for a time. When another compressor comes from Poti let him have that one, but give this to me. I'll soon be finished with repairs, I have to sail, not to stand tied up."

"Great Gods," Baburchenok exploded. "D'you think your butter churn's the only ship in the flotilla in operation? What about me? Don't I go out?"

Reshetnikov judiciously overlooked the reference to the butter churn and turned to Baburchenok mildly:

"Yes, you do, Sergei Matveich, you certainly do, more than you realize. You're going out tonight with the Rear-Admiral; they've been buzzing for you..."

"To Poti, you mean?"

"That's what I heard," Reshetnikov said and with a courage he did not recognize went on: "You're always

boasting you can get anything. Surely you can get hold of a compressor there?"

He expected a stinging reply but to his own and everybody else's astonishment, Baburchenok perked up and said happily:

"That's a fact. I'll get one. Tied up in cellophane and ribbons; too. It's quite clear, clear as daylight. Comrade Captain-Lieutenant, give the compressor to the youngster—he's calculated pretty well. I'll manage to find one for myself all right."

Fedotych kept silent, then, jotting something down in his notebook, looked first at Reshetnikov, then at Baburchenok.

"Very well. Send Bykov over. We'll start changing it tomorrow. And you come back in an hour and pick up a slip for the fleet engineer."

"Oh, I don't need one. I'll manage all right," said Baburchenok complacently.

"No, take it," Fedotych insisted. "You'll collect for all three. Try to do something for the community for a change and not just for your own hearth and home. That's all. I've got work to do."

Fedotych stuck his nose back into his magic book with its chronicle of the wounds and concussions, mutilations and maladies suffered by the sloops in engagements and voyages—an unseen and little-known record of the fighting service of the heroic little ships in their second year of a great, hard-fought war.

In some way—maybe thanks to Fedotych who on that occasion had been pleased by Reshetnikov's behaviour—the story of the ingenious and energetic way the new captain of SK 0944 had managed to snatch the compressor from Baburchenok himself became known in the flotilla. And, of course, it reached the ears of Bykov and he appreciated it in his own way, seeing in it a manifestation of what he considered the most valuable of a captain's qualities: a concern for the engines of his ship. In his long years of service Bykov had seen captains who considered that it

was their job to play on the bridge with the handles of the machine telegraph and that the way the engine-room replied was the concern of the chief engineer, a man to be treated severely. The new captain was again restored to favour and Bykov magnanimously forgot the matter of the repair of the propeller shaft, all the more easily because, to tell the truth, one could sail and fight with a "fever," while without a reliable compressor one could not count on the engines starting immediately, which, of course, was more important.

Bykov's favour took expression in a remarkable way. Three days later Reshetnikov went out for the day in Somov's sloop (Vladykin was sending him out more and more frequently on other sloops—"to get to know the ropes"). Returning at night and lying down on his narrow, short bunk, he felt to his surprise that his feet were not as usual touching the partition but that he could stretch them freely into a space of unknown provenance. He switched on the light and laughed: a section of the partition had been sawn out and in the hole had been fixed a neat, painted metal box which, as he learned next morning, jutted into a locker in the wardroom. He lay down again and for the first time since he had come on board stretched his tired legs with pleasure, and as he fell happily off to sleep the proud thought flashed through his mind that it looked as if he had really got used to his crew and that, with each passing day, life in the sloop was growing more interesting and easy.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

In childhood man possesses a remarkable capacity for infusing life into objects around him, regarding them as living things deprived only of speech, and imagining them to have all-but-human qualities. Usually this capacity is lost with the years: life brings work and struggle, other serious cares occupy the mind, the heart hardens, the imag-

ination loses its brightness, and man forgets how to create out of objects and events which in time he has come to find rather humdrum that special wonderful world, so exciting and unusual. And only when all his being is in a state of high tension, in moments of great exaltation—be it through love, or inspired work, or some immense grief, or equally immense joy—does he regain that forgotten capacity to transform the world. And again, as in childhood, the world shares his feelings: everything smiles, rejoices or weeps with him and speaks of his love, his thoughts, his sorrow, his victory.

But the exaltation subsides, love passes, work comes to an end, and sorrow abates—and the world turns dull again. Its colours fade, dreams float away, objects lose their voices and their magical whispers are no longer audible: a hand-kerchief becomes an ordinary piece of cloth, a blueprint a mere sheet of tracing-paper, a medal a conventional mark of merit. And times come when a man will look at these things and pine for that beautiful, perfect sense of excitement he felt when he kissed that handkerchief, argued over the blueprint and saw drops of his own blood on the enamel of the medal. How much he would like to bring those objects to life again, to instill into them the feelings he once had the power to summon! But his heart is closed and only memories come to goad him with their sharp little barbs.

Alexei Reshetnikov was in that state of spiritual exaltation, when every impression is sharpened, every emotion heightened and the mind made supple and swift-acting, which means that all the moral and mental forces in a man are in a condition of high tension; when life, work, people, nature—everything—appears in a special, inspiring light. As a rule, this state is born from success and is the progenitor of new successes. It was so with Reshetnikov: it was as if the scales had fallen from his eyes and his hands had been freed from their bonds—he saw clearly what he had to do, and everything, however trivial, he did success-

fully and well, as if inspired. He could not himself say when that had started. It looked as if one success had led on to another, and that to a third, rather like the way the first pull on the oars starts a heavy boat moving, so that it gains speed and gathers a reserve of momentum, until the time comes when the oarsmen have only to give a light touch to their oars for its heavy mass to go thrusting through the water.

In this happy state of mind Reshetnikov was able to take his first ship in hand considerably quicker than he had dreamed possible. The decisive factors were undoubtedly the sharp turn for the better in his relations with Khazov after his talk with Vladykin and the real trouble he took to find the exact place he ought to occupy in his relations with the rest of his subordinates. His next success was with Artiushin, then came Bykov, after which he went on getting to know and "place" the rest—and before long he was getting a quite clear picture of his little band of warriors.

He could not yet say with confidence, of course, who, to quote Vladykin, could be trusted to face unflinchingly almost certain death and whom it would be necessary to keep an eye on during battle, but he had already learned much from his constant meetings with people at their spells of training, or while they were working on the repairs, or during hours of repose and from serious or light-hearted talks on the jetty of an evening, when the dusk was gathering over the bay and the regular visit by enemy aircraft was still some way off. All this had to be systematized, summed up and memorized. So he decided to keep a notebook like the one he had often seen Vladykin holding as, during a conversation, he jotted down something occasionally in a minute but very clear handwriting.

On the analogy of the well-known "Navigational Tables," which envisage all possible occurrences in the life of a navigator, Lieutenant Baburchenok called this notebook the "Psychological Tables." He maintained that with its help

Vladykin could decide who would quarrel on the following day about refuelling, who could count on being recommended for a decoration and who on a reprimand and what dream who was going to have next Wednesday. That was how accurate and detailed were Vladykin's facts about all the officers of the flotilla—and he was always adding to them.

But what Vladykin wrote in his notebook no one, including Reshetnikov, knew, and after some reflection, Reshetnikov decided to make his own notebook-like the one he had read about—wasn't it in the biography of Zola, in which the famous novelist noted absolutely everything about his heroes, starting from the colour of their hair. To each of his subordinates Reshetnikov allotted an equal number of pages and, to begin with, he spent two evenings in succession, faithfully transcribing details from the ship's files on each man's record, rank and service. From this he discovered that with the exception of Sizov and Zhadan, everybody on board was older than the captain. Khazov was ten years older, Bykov eight, while there was only one man of the same age as Reshetnikov-Leading Seaman Anton Chaika, in charge of the mines, a man with whom Reshetnikov felt quite at ease, maybe because Chaika was secretary of the flotilla Komsomol organization and he had held really frank talks with him since his first day on board. It was Chaika who, at Reshetnikov's request, had procured the snapshot of Paramonov from which the enlargement hanging in the crew's quarters had been made. Reshetnikov's notebook disclosed another fact—and one that was not very pleasant for him to learn: even Zhadan, not to mention the others, had been fighting when Reshetnikov was taking his finals at the Naval College.

On the third evening he reached the main part of his work: now he should be able to write under each name succinct characteristics of each member of the ship's company as a Soviet man and as a sailor. And at this point

Reshetnikov realized that he was no Vladykin, and not even a Zola.

He made a start with Lieutenant Mikheyev who as second-in-command of the sloop had pride of place in the book. Reshetnikov lived side by side with him and had him under his eyes all the time during his regular duties both on the repairs and with the crew; yet he could think of nothing to write about him. Mikheyev was in every respect very correct and orderly—normal, one might say, with nothing about him to be specially praised or condemned. Judging from what the seamen said, he had done pretty well in the battle when Paramonov was killed. But there was something "stream-lined" about him—he did not draw attention to himself; you felt neither attracted nor repulsed in your relations with him. To think that there are people about whom there's definitely nothing to say!

Reshetnikov sighed and turned to Bykov, a personality who only recently had been as plain as a pikestaff to him. He wrote boldly: "Loyal to his engines. Morose but responsive. Modest, taciturn..."—and suddenly the whole idea seemed to him quite futile.

He snapped the book to angrily. Vladykin, probably, wrote down quite different things (he'd have paid a lot for a glance at what was written there under his name)—but the dull bureaucratic notes he was making were more like a schoolboy's composition on the subject: "Characteristics of the Heroes of Goncharov's The Precipice." And what was the point of these notes, anyhow? He knew his men, didn't he? Surely it wasn't necessary to put down that on the first occasion he would have to discharge the engine-room hand Luzhsky, a pushing, loose-tongued fellow who just could not get used to the fact that he, formerly the driver of some responsible assistant manager of a trust, was vegetating in a sloop as an ordinary engine-room hand, and for that reason was always intriguing against his superior Larionov and dribbling on about Bykov. Or did he have to note that during night firing Petrosian should be switched from

loading to sighting the aft gun because he was a mountain shepherd and could see better in the dark than the regular gun-layer Kapustin? No, by jotting things down on paper one only took all the life out of those bright and vital thoughts that came to mind with the mention of each name.... To hell with this literary work!

Thus meditating, he undressed and lay on his bunk relishing the feeling that even the tips of his toes pressed against nothing now, and he was just falling off to sleep when a sudden thought jerked him up. He switched on the light and, on the page of the notebook reserved for Bykov, wrote, carefully and slowly, the words "Foot-shelf."

This phrase was Lieutenant Baburchenok's name for Bykov's invention. Since the incident of the compressor, Baburchenok had conceived a sudden liking for Reshetnikov, addressing him familiarly and often coming on board SK 0944. Of course, one could not put down briefly and expressively the whole story of the relations of the chief engineer with his new captain and at the same time explain what kind of man this "morose but responsive" Bykov really was. Reshetnikov congratulated himself on his new discovery: that was how one should keep the notebook, by writing down not the "characteristics" of people but their deeds, which, in fact, showed their characters! So he wrote against Artiushin's name: "Sulphidine." And as quickly he found a word for Zhadan: "Magnet." Incidentally, after a moment's reflection, he wrote the same word on Anton Chaika's page. That was quite apt: it was Chaika who had come to Zhadan's rescue when he found him looking desperately into the sea where he had just tipped the bowl containing the sloop's entire collection of cutlery, which he had himself put in it for washing. The witnesses of this accident were rocking with laughter at the sight of his harrowed face, and Zhadan was on the verge of tears, loathing himself for his sloppiness and horrified at the prospect of serving supper without cutlery. Then Chaika, taking in the situation at a glance, hurriedly brought up from the workshop a magnetized bar and fished out the sunken cutlery. Zhadan was saved—and ever since was ready to follow Chaika through thick and thin.

In this way Reshetnikov's "book of spells" began to fill up. He invariably carried it on his person. From time to time he would make new entries: short and incomprehensible to others, though signifying to him events, people's behaviour and qualities. And only the pages allotted to Khazov remained empty.

With every day that passed, he noticed that he was becoming better friends with the boatswain than with anybody else. He insisted on his joining the officers for meals in the wardroom, maintaining that the boatswain, in fact if not in name, was the number two, and making his point clearer by addressing him as Nikita Petrovich when off duty. In the evenings he often invited him into his cabin or took him off for a stroll along the jetty before turning in, and there they talked over the most varied topics.

Generally it was Reshetnikov who did the talking; Khazov remained quiet. But those silences had a peculiar quality: they conveyed the impression that Khazov was undoubtedly interested; and his brief replies were so pregnant with understanding that sometimes they stimulated Reshetnikov's thoughts. For the time being he asked nothing more: he was one of those people who have to think aloud, and whose thoughts fade or scatter in silence. Conversation was for him a play of thoughts in which his mind made happy discoveries that he remembered better later. The fact that his companion remained silent was even an advantage.

Naturally, at this stage Reshetnikov could have written many expressive things on the pages reserved for Khazov, and they would have been something like milestones on the far from straight road towards real friendship with the boatswain. But he could not bring himself to write these things, perhaps because it was still difficult to choose the principal and most significant ones, or because of some

almost superstitious fear of spoiling a new and precious relationship which he did not yet dare to call friendship. It seemed to him that while he could find a way of denoting his relations with any other person, he could no more put a label to Nikita Petrovich, or to what he did or said, than he could describe music in words.

All the same, he did make one first entry—unnecessary, for the event it referred to imprinted itself on his memory as a new discovery.

It happened after an important conversation with Lieutenant Baburchenok, whom Reshetnikov was coming to like more and more. He was even beginning to think that Seryozha Baburchenok could to some extent replace Vasya Glukhov who was now on active service in the Baltic. He felt the need for some friendly fellow of his own age, someone he could open his heart to and laugh with and consult about all kinds of small matters, though not about the great, significant concept of friendship. And it was a carefree, companionable relationship of this nature which was ripening between the two officers.

Once, as they were returning from a captains' class (Vladykin was strict about this and demanded attendance of all captains who were not at sea), Reshetnikov for some reason recalled his talk with Fedotych and asked what had made Baburchenok capitulate so easily and give up such a treasure. Baburchenok laughingly confessed that a new compressor he had been able to get hold of had been waiting a long time for him at Poti but that he had not had any chance of going for it in the sloop; when Reshetnikov told him about the trip with the Rear-Admiral the situation had changed.

"You were lucky, really lucky.... If it hadn't been for that trip you'd have no more seen that compressor than you can see your own ears—my chief engineer had got everything beautifully engineered."

However, he did not disclose exactly what ruse his chief engineer had devised and kept silent about Petliayev's pact and the diplomatic meal of fish soup when that pact was intended to have its foreseen effects. Actually, he had no wish at all to tell Reshetnikov about it: there was something in Petliayev's plan that was cynical, dishonourable in relation to his comrades, the captains of the other sloops. Even when he was in Fedotych's office Lieutenant Baburchenok had been repenting that he had listened to Petliayev. That was why he was so pleased to hear about the trip to Poti, which had freed his hands, and why, probably, he felt grateful to Reshetnikov who, unwittingly, had helped him out of an unpleasant situation.

And at once, as if in repayment, Baburchenok generously offered Reshetnikov any help in materials or spare parts he might need during the repairs.

"That Bykov of yours is an old stick-in-the-mud; you'll be lost with him," he said in a tone of commiseration. "He hasn't enough initiative; I told Paramonov that once. He's always on his own, doesn't get around.... Engineers ought to keep together, you see, like on a collective farm, sharing things with each other: you know, I give you a valve one day, and the next you let me have, say, a gasket ... Real engineers—those who really feel for their machinery—always have some sort of mortar that binds 'em, a comradeship, an agreement to give each other a helping hand, and, of course, in a flotilla like ours that's specially true. Now, who works that way? My Petliayev. Nobody likes Bykov very much, but Petliayev's everybody's favourite. If anything goes wrong, they're off to him: he's ready to help anybody, he can lay his hands on things the others don't even dream of. He's a marvel at running things. I'm telling you because I like you: get rid of that flop and find a young, quick, efficient fellow. Anyway, it'll be easier for you to have a younger man to deal with.... By the way, you don't need to look far," Baburchenok went on with a new burst of animation, having decided to grant his new friend the ultimate favour. "Would you like me to give you my Sliudyanik? He's a leading seaman, a wizard; there's nothing he doesn't know about engines. I've had him with me over a year, in charge of the engine-room crew, and I'd have made him chief engineer if I hadn't been sent Petliayev from reserve.... Actually, he's as good as Petliayev—he's pure quicksilver—the work just melts in his hands and he's a wonder at getting hold of things, not like your Bykov. It's high time he got a promotion and found his right level. I'd been proposing him to Paramonov since the spring, but Paramonov had grown used to his Bykov and wouldn't hear of it. Why should you get used to Bykov? Well, what d'you say to it? We'll report to Vladykin tomorrow and he'll sanction it straightaway: he loves to shift people around, make seamen into officers and mechanics into engineers...."

Baburchenok had fallen so heavily on Reshetnikov with his unexpected proposal that Reshetnikov lost his head and even went so far as to promise to think the matter over. It was only when he had regained his ship and found himself alone that he came to; then he felt uncomfortable, and ashamed of himself, as if, in not refusing at once, he had somehow let Bykov down.

But next morning, as if fate had ordained it, Bykov came to him for his signature to some oft-repeated application to Fedotych for various small parts, for lack of which the assembling of the port engine was being held up. Reshetnikov suggested he should first go to Petliayev and see what he could get out of him. But Bykov, who was already looking glum enough over his misfortunes, only scowled the more.

"It's as you say, Comrade Lieutenant, but I'm not going to bow and scrape before Petliayev," he said firmly. "He'll help me all right but afterwards he'll get a whole engine out of me for those two bolts."

"You know best," replied Reshetnikov, rather irritatedly, and signed the form, reflecting that Baburchenok was, perhaps, right: Bykov was a heavy sort of fellow, hard to get along with, and that, of course, brought little gain to the

ship. Baburchenok's proposal did not seem so crazy, after all. In any case, it was worth thinking about Sliudyanik and weighing up the pros and cons....

But he was given no time for his cogitations, so unexpected a turn did the whole affair take.

It happened three or four days later at a joint Party and Komsomol meeting, the second that had been since Reshetnikov joined the flotilla. The agenda consisted of a report by Engineer Captain-Lieutenant Mendeleyev (Reshetnikov did not at first realize this was simply Fedotych) on measures for speeding up and improving post-operational repairs. The discussion began rather lamely: it was like an ordinary production conference with irritating squabbles between mechanics, engineers and supply men who hurled reproaches at each other for technical failures, of interest only to themselves. The hall (the meeting was being held in a large, cold room of a partly-ruined sanatorium) became noisy and it was difficult to hear what was being said. Reshetnikov suddenly discovered that he was not interested in the faulty way some component nobody knew anything about had been forged, but in the origin of a thin draught of ice-cold air that was freezing his knees. And, catching a glance from Baburchenok, who was sitting near by on the window-sill, he raised a hand to his mouth as if concealing a yawn, in reply to which Baburchenok raised his eyes to the ceiling, twitched his nose comically and pretended to fall asleep, only to wake up with a start and assume an expression of exaggerated attention.

Vladykin, who had been frowning for some time and on two or three occasions had leaned over to speak to other members of the Bureau, reminded the Communists that they should speak about important questions and not about minor matters: the main thing was people but now all the talk was about machinery. The moment he sat down, Khazov rose from a bench in the fifth row and asked for the floor, adding that it was just about people that he intended to speak.

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Reshetnikov could not imagine Khazov as a public speaker and prepared himself to listen with interest. Khazov's first words made him prick up his ears: apparently he was going to speak about the subject Baburchenok had raised recently—the bonds of mutual support between the engineers of the flotilla.

Khazov began by saying that every good engineer, like every sensible boatswain, will certainly try to put something aside for a rainy day—tools or materials or anything he is likely to need in his work. People argued like this: the supply department's all right but it's not a bad idea to have something in one's own hoard. They were not the first to go in for that system, and they would not be the last. Evidently, there was no doing away with this form of thrift; after all, who would want to go chasing after the authorities for every washer? Well, the result of this was that on the sloops the engineers kept their own stores, without any way-bills or invoices, all on a friendly basis, taking each other on trust: the "I scratch your back, you scratch mine" system. What was wrong was not the idea of these hoards but the people who were making them and the methods they used.

And at this point he unexpectedly named Petliayev, who, he said, had managed by hook or by crook to amass so many things in short supply that he had come to occupy a unique and somewhat dubious position among the engineers of the sloops.

"What's wrong with that? Petliayev's not such a stick-inthe-mud as some others," Baburchenok challenged him.

Khazov turned in his direction and for a moment or two said nothing; Reshetnikov was afraid the interjection had thrown him out of his stride. But Khazov resumed in a quiet, cutting voice:

"You might ask: what's wrong with a Communist and a naval officer asking such a question?"

Baburchenok flushed; Reshetnikov noticed that Vladykin nodded his approval. Khazov went on speaking, looking all

the time at Baburchenok, as if he found it easier to talk to one man than to make a speech.

That question showed, he said, that the "businessman" habits, so alien to the Navy, which Petliayev had brought with him from civilian life, did not worry even his captain of the sloop, who saw what was going on more often and more plainly than anyone else. So it was not surprising that others were not worried about it. As a matter of fact, they considered it amusing and approved of it. What a wangler Petliayev is, they said, there's nothing he can't lay his hands on; if only we had a man like that on board our ship! And, actually, what could one hold against the fellow? He didn't steal; he wasn't a swindler; he just knew how to find things out in good time and then to get hold of them quick. Well, as people were so tolerant of Petliayev it was natural he should have his disciples, men like Sliudyanik or Strakhov, the engineer on SK 0874—and that was something worse, more dangerous. And what was really bad was that nobody said a word about the way Petliayev's methods were affecting the fighting capacity of the sloops.

"What's the fighting capacity got to do with the subject?" Baburchenok shouted so loudly that Reshetnikov involuntarily turned in his direction. His face was beetroot red, twitching with anger, and he was leaning forward on the high window-sill, looking rather like an enraged, spitting cat about to spring from a fence. "It's just the other way round. Thanks to Petliayev my ship's always in running order, everyone knows that."

"Quite correct, Comrade Lieutenant," replied Khazov. "Your ship, yes. But what about the others?"

And he went on to say that Petliayev's "golden treasury" (or, as he called it, "Petliayev's ship-chandler's store") did not serve to help other sloops at all, but only Baburchenok's. If an engineer got the part he was short of there, then his sloop would go out on operations, but if it did not suit Petliayev to let him have it, then the sloop would have to wait until the part arrived from Poti. So what happened was

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that the fighting capacity of the sloops depended not on headquarters but on Petliayev's whim. Of course, all the engineers knew that was so, but they kept quiet about it. Why did they keep quiet? Because they didn't want to deprive themselves of this handy "ship-chandler's store" where they could get anything by doing a swop. Or was it because they were a bit afraid of Petliayev who wielded such power that even Communists spoke about him in a whisper, and in corners, at that? Did the Communists in the flotilla know the not particularly comradely way Petliayev—a candidate for Party membership—had recently been planning to grab from other sloops the only new compressor sent up from the main base, although, as it turned out afterwards, he and his captain had already got one waiting for them in Poti?

Now everybody was looking at Baburchenok who sat unnaturally stiff, his face pale and drawn. Reshetnikov averted his eyes with a curious feeling of shame and embarrassment.

Listening to Khazov he realized what lay behind Babur-chenok's joke that his chief engineer could "engineer" anything.

So this harmless "golden treasury" of Petliayev's consisted of spare parts for lack of which other vessels were being kept lying in port for long spells; that meant, then, that by keeping those parts for himself or until he could exchange them at a favourable rate, Petliayev was, actually, playing into the hands of the fascists. And those rare parts were being obediently acquired for the "golden treasury" by an officer who was a Communist. So this was not the jolly little game, the unusual kind of sport it had appeared to all, including Reshetnikov, but really a way of robbing the other sloops of things they needed. Moreover, there was never anything like mutual aid and comradely arrangements between the engineers of the sloops: in reality it was a case of the age-long relationship between the

resourceful kulak and the landless peasants who depended on him; Bykov had been right when he had said that for two bolts Petliayev would get a whole engine out of him later on....

And it was with sudden shame that Reshetnikov recalled how he had been on the point of replacing Bykov by Sliudyanik, who would have brought to the sloop that spirit of restless, avid greed picked up from Petliayev, the spirit of foul speculation on others' needs, the disgusting spirit of corruption which like a cancerous growth would have crept from Baburchenok's sloop on to his own, to infect its crew.

After those wonderfully happy, bright and, somehow, clean days, which Reshetnikov had recently spent in building up friendship with his ship and its company, all this shocked him so profoundly that he was hardly aware of the rest of the proceedings; they were a mere background to his turbid, heavy thoughts. And he felt quite glad when a sudden clap of gunfire and the wail of sirens broke up the meeting and sent him dashing out of the sanatorium.

The air-raid was not very heavy but the attackers were persistent: despite the dense fire of the guns of sloops which had taken up their night stations in various parts of the bay, the planes made five or six attempts to unload their bombs on the ammunition ship which had arrived that evening. Reshetnikov regained his sloop during the third attack.

The gunfire somehow lightened his spirits, but when the "all clear" sounded and he went below to his cabin, his mind reverted to what had happened at the meeting up to the time of the alarm.

He remembered everything in a haze. More than anything else he remembered Baburchenok, a perplexed and unusually pitiful Baburchenok. He had confirmed the story of the "pact" and said with much sincerity that only on hearing Khazov had he realized what a foolish and shameful

role he had played in the hoarding of the parts; he admitted to being a bad officer and a blind Communist in not having seen Petliayev's "golden treasury" for what it really was, and in having taken it to be a harmless trick, an asset for the sloop.

And in Reshetnikov's eyes Baburchenok, carefree, self-reliant, always happy, always successful, conquering all with his peculiar charm, Baburchenok the bold and mettle-some captain, the man who but yesterday seemed to be the one who might become his trusted, responsive, gay-natured companion, turned into someone quite other than his imagination had pictured, suddenly faded, withered, drooped.

Reshetnikov required the whole night to comprehend what this discovery meant to him and it was morning before he fell asleep. More than anything he thought about Khazov who had perceived in Petliayev—to all appearances an ordinary sort of scrounger—a threat to the fighting capacity of the entire flotilla, and, recognizing this threat, had immediately pointed it out to the Communists and Komsomol members.

Exactly why had Khazov done that? Surely there were many besides him who knew full well about Petliayev's "ship-chandler's store," but were either afraid to mention it, or failed to see and understand the danger of this exchange point, so foreign to the spirit of a military collective—a sort of black market like those which spring up as thick as mushrooms around some big garages, where there is machinery and a shortage of parts and materials for them. Even Bykov, who knew all about the nature of Petliayev and his "store," had kept quiet about it. Why he did that was not clear, but, of course, it could not have been through any fear of Petliayev.

For a long time Reshetnikov sought for the right word to signify just what Bykov lacked, and not only Bykov but he himself and dozens of other Communists and Komsomol members in the flotilla. And he fell asleep with that word still unfound. But he found just the phrase to apply to the incident itself (actually, it was Nikita Petrovich's phrase): "shipchandler's store."

With this phrase he started, at last, his notes on the pages reserved for Khazov. It was a strange, dead phrase, one that crept out of the old world of swindling, moneygrubbing and avarice, which had been swept away by the Revolution—a dangerous, alien idea, breeding psychology that poisons mankind. However, as a discovery it was astonishingly apt and appealed greatly to Reshetnikov.

Khazov drew still closer, became still more necessary to him. And although he now thought about the boatswain with a feeling of profound respect, as a man whose moral sense was much higher than his own, a new intimacy stole into their evening talks. What was new was the way that from time to time, especially when the bay lay calm and dreaming, traversed by a silent, sparkling path of moonlight, and the high dome of the sky was too light to be comfortable for German planes to come filling it with the sickening drone of their engines, Khazov would start to talk. Whether he had surrendered to Reshetnikov's young, eager thirst for everything that could help him to know and understand his surroundings, or had been won over by the sincerity with which Reshetnikov told him about his parents, about his childhood days in the Altai, about Vasya Glukhov, with whom he had dreamed of the Navy, Khazov began to reply to his questions more willingly and to reveal something of himself.

So Reshetnikov discovered that Khazov came from an old naval family. The little house in the Petrovsky sloboda in Sevastopol, in which four generations of Black Sea sailors had been reared, had survived both sieges: at least, in June, in the period of the most savage bombing, Khazov had found it intact though empty. True, all the glass was broken in the windows, the porch was wrecked, not to mention the trees in the garden that had been uprooted by shell-fire, and the disappearance of the bench under the pear-tree where

he had listened to Grandad Aniki Ivanovich's tales about the defence of Sevastopol and about the bastions where with other little boys he had carried melons and water for his father and the other sailors. There, on the Fourth Bastion, a French cannon-ball had killed his great-grandfather, gunner in the *Uriil*, and Khazov remembered the place very well although Grandad had taken him there only once, when he was eight years old—just the age Grandad had been himself in the year of the siege of Sevastopol.

On that morning a bewhiskered sailor had come to see them, all wrapped in machine-gun belts (only a week before regiments of the Red Army had broken into Sevastopol), and Nikita, yelling "Daddy's come back!" for the whole garden to hear, dashed to meet the man, because that was just how he pictured his father whom he remembered badly, having been separated from him when he was only six. But the sailor moved him aside a little, went up to Aniki Ivanovich and told him not to expect his son Pyotr back: he had been killed on the For the Revolution armoured train almost a year earlier while fighting against the Whiteguards in the Ukraine. Nikita's mother fell down on the grass with a wild, heart-rending cry. It was then that Grandad had taken Nikita by the hand and led him off to the Fourth Bastion.

Nikita cried the whole way there and Grandad stumbled as if he did not see the path very clearly. Then, when they reached the bastion, they sat for a long time on an old gun, staring without saying a word at the edge of the breastwork where a neat little cross was marked in the ground with white stones. Then he sighed and said that both his father and his son had fallen in battle, as it befitted sailors to do, while he was only a burden to himself and to others. He stooped with a groan, straightened a stone or two, which some careless foot had disturbed, and told Nikita that he ought to return there and look after the cross because he would never come back there himself. And he was right: from that day Grandad either sat on the bench

under the pear-tree or lay on his bed, and eighteen months later he died without ever going back to the bastion.

Khazov's grandfather was in the centre of all his tales. It was from Grandad that little Nikita learned not only about his father—a quartermaster in the destroyer Gadzhibey and a member of the ship's committee, but also about many unknown events and ideas. His father, he learned, had nearly drowned at Tsushima—and so Nikita learned about the battle of Tsushima. His father was aboard the destroyer Zhivuchy when she was sunk—and so Nikita learned about the First World War. Then he served aboard the Gadzhibey until she was sunk in Novorossiisk Bay, and so Nikita learned about the Revolution and why the Black Sea sailors blew up and scuttled their own ships. But his father had fallen in action far from the sea, in the steppe—and so, from Grandad, Nikita learned what the Civil War and the sailors of the Revolution were. Grandad told him, too, about the Navy, about ships and engines, mines and guns, and about the Turkish War in which he had fought aboard the Grand Duke Constantine from which small torpedo-carrying sloops were launched, about the officers the sailors liked and respected and about those they hated. Naval fortitude, the strong bonds that link the hearts of sailors, and a sense of pride in the service passed from the old man's aging heart into the small, ardent heart of the child, so avid for life, so open to the world; and at ten Nikita already knew that he was going to spend his life in the Navy, as his father, his grandfather and his great-grandfather before him had done.

The repairs to the sloop were nearly finished and there was less and less time for these long intimate talks. In recent weeks Vladykin had sent Reshetnikov on various trips—sometimes in Somov's sloop, sometimes with Baburchenok who, after his reprimand over the Petliayev affair, had somehow grown up, though becoming, if anything, even more daring in battle. And sometimes Reshetnikov went out with Kalitin, who was in command of their pair. But

the task never varied: it was to observe everything that was done on the sloop during the trip, in battle, too, should the occasion arise, and to store all that in his mind.

At first Reshetnikov felt quite hurt: after all, he was no little boy to be treated like a visitor up from the country. But from the very first trip he realized that in Vladykin's flotilla this kind of "excursion" was something like those flights on which an experienced air-force pilot takes a novice up with him. On those outings Reshetnikov learned all the special features about entering the bay by day or night, subtle points known only to the captains of the sloops, such as the sunken gunboat near the Seventh Cape where it was necessary to make a sudden turn to 84 degree so as to avoid coming under direct fire from a German battery concealed behind the cape. On Kalitin's sloop he realized, as he watched the masterly behaviour of the commander of the pair, that his own scrap on SK 0519 had been sheer luck, an outrageous stroke of fortune. From Somov he learned about night landings, from Baburchenok his own method of spotting the fire-points of the enemy. For that, Baburchenok raced him at full speed three times along the coast, switching the exhaust from submerged to open and thus drawing ferocious fire, after which nothing remained to be done but note the gun flashes. Besides these instructive lessons Reshetnikov heard a heap of sundry advice on these trips, applicable to all and every occasion in the uncalm life of a patrol sloop.

On his return to his own ship he would go over everything with Khazov, who had become indispensable to him.

The better Reshetnikov came to know him, the more often he found himself thinking that, of all those around him, Khazov was the one who could best be called a friend, though there was a big difference in their ages and Khazov was his subordinate—unjustly, of course, for it should have been the other way round. Only a real friend could have helped him so carefully and prudently during those early difficult days of his command. Vladykin, of course, had been quite right when he had said that Khazov was doing everything for him that a good Communist ought to do for a Komsomol member and an experienced sailor for (here Reshetnikov did not spare himself and used the word that Vladykin had not uttered then) a pup like him. No, he would go further: the things Khazov had done for him were those that only a very true and devoted and unselfish friend would do.

But the main thing for Reshetnikov was that Khazov reminded him increasingly of his beloved Pyotr Ilyich Yershov who had been nearer and dearer to him than his own father—Yershov who had played a decisive role in his life and whom he had missed so much during these few years of independent life.

## CHAPTER NINE

Although, of course, a considerable number of people knew about the secret night operation on which SK 0944 was now nearing the enemy-occupied coast, each of them interpreted it differently.

The ship's crew saw it as a routine night trip deep into the rear of the enemy, to land a reconnaissance party at the cove where, a fortnight earlier, the sloop had carried out the same operation without any undue trouble.

Boatswain Khazov who had the responsibility of getting the landing party to the beach and bringing the boat back to the sloop knew very well that this time anything might be expected and that special care would therefore have to be exercised.

Lieutenant Voronin, in charge of the reconnaissance group, knew that among the small detachment of partisans in the mountains to which they might have to fight their way, was a comrade who had to be brought to Baffling Cove or, in case the landing operation ran into snags, to another, more remote place.

Lieutenant Reshetnikov knew that this comrade was in possession of information so important that Major Lunikov himself was taking part in the operation, and that in the event of an unsuccessful landing at Baffling Cove an agreed signal had to be radioed, following which a second sloop with another landing party would be sent elsewhere, so that the information could be obtained in time.

For Vladykin, the commander of the flotilla of patrol sloops, the operation was connected with an impending landing operation by marines, and the information he was expecting would facilitate the task of his sloops, which Fleet Headquarters intended to use in the initial thrust.

At Fleet Headquarters they were in a hurry to see the operation carried out because reinforcements had to be sent to the marines in the new position on the Crimean coast before a large infantry landing with artillery and heavy equipment was made.

To the Admiral commanding the Fleet it was known that the later landing operation, which had the task of moving in on Sevastopol, was connected with the impending new offensive, an extension of the recent successes on the Stalingrad front, and dependent on the general situation on the maritime front.

The commander of that front knew that in the course of the new offensive his entire activity, including the proposed landing operation, was a mere diversion that was intended to draw the enemy's attention and forces away from the real intentions of the High Command.

But not even the highest-ranking military leaders directing the conduct of the war could, at this moment, say of these real intentions with certainty whether they would eventuate at the exact moment and in the precise manner envisaged in the new operational plan which was itself only one link in the general strategic plan. That depended on many factors: on the success of other similar plans of the High Command developing in other sectors of the front between the Arctic and the Black Sea; on whether the So-

viet people would deliver punctually to its great army the supplies of weapons and ammunition it required; and on whether the main offensive now being mounted and involving thousands of preparatory measures, including the despatch of SK 0944 to Baffling Cove, would turn out to have been the only right one to launch at that moment.

Of all those people, with their different interpretations of the sloop's night mission, only Major Lunikov and the Fleet Command knew that Comrade D., returning from the Crimean underground, was bringing with him, in addition to material useful for the landing operation, other more important information of immediate interest to the High Command. In issuing orders to Lunikov to bring back Comrade D., for whom a special plane from Moscow was standing by, the Commander of the Fleet had specially underlined the urgency of the matter. That is why Lunikov had selected Baffling Cove, although of all the choices offered by Vladykin it had seemed the least safe and reliable.

The fact was that when the information fell into Comrade D.'s hands, the partisans, who had been driven into the mountains, had lost their air strip, and so Comrade D. had to ask for a sloop to be sent, and named the cove which was convenient because it was five or six hours' journey on foot from the mountain hide-out of the small partisan unit which he had joined after leaving Sevastopol. This cove was the very one where, a few days before, the SK 0874 incident had taken place (he knew nothing about that, of course)—the place that Lunikov called Baffling Cove.

In his talk with Vladykin, Major Lunikov saw it would take six to eight days to reach Comrade D. from the other landing places proposed, and as many to get back. So he had decided to run a risk—and if he could not be able to complete the operation from Baffling Cove, to start it there at least. In his heart of hearts he felt sure that everything would turn out fairly easy. After all, there was no way of knowing what could have happened to the landing party

put ashore there the previous week. Owing to the nature of their mission they could not give any information about themselves and one could only guess. By interrogating Vladykin about what usually happened at unsuccessful landings, Lunikov learned that they were always accompanied by some sort of noise—explosions, bursts of rifle fire or, at least, single shots. The silence which accompanied the last landing showed, above all, that if anything had happened it was not to the scouts but to the boat on its way back to the sloop. So there was a fair chance that the present group would get through to the mountains all right. And there they could take a risk with their radio and ask Reshetnikov whether the boat had returned—and if they found that there was no question of being picked up again at Baffling Cove, then, without losing any time, they could take Comrade D. to the alternative rendezvous. farther along the coast to where he would be met by the second group. This would halve the delay in getting the information through and that, of course, was very important for the High Command.

But Lunikov did not believe they would have to resort to this alternative and his thoughts kept turning to the boat and its return trip, because the main task was to make certain that the scouts would be picked up on the following day. That is why he had asked Reshetnikov to send him the man in charge of the boat.

And, hardly able to wait until Khazov had drunk his cocoa, Lunikov began to bombard him with questions. How did he intend to land them? Straight into the water? Or would they have to jump across the rocks? Or could they run the boat on to the pebbles? Would they leave the boat unguarded for a time while the actual landing was being made? What sort of beach was there inside the cove—smooth or rocky? Did the cliffs overhang the sea? How would the boat come back: across the middle of the bay or would it be better to creep along the coast? How would they find the sloop which would be lying a mile, maybe

more, off the coast? Was there a likelihood of a false signal putting her off her course? Or of her being intercepted?

The questions were unexpected, naive sometimes and even, or so Khazov thought, quite silly, but behind them the boatswain sensed so much grave prudence that in his eyes the impending landing began to assume an unusual importance. And although Lunikov did not say so outright, Khazov realized that the whole point of the conversation was to impress on him the importance of the operation and his own part in it, without, of course, giving him any details about it that he should not know.

"Look here, Comrade Khazov, the whole point is this," he said, now not at all the military man. "Everything depends, you see, on whether your boat survives, or whether it will disappear like the last one. God only knows what they could have done with it. You said there are cliffs, didn't you, and that the boat passes close to them. What if some great rock were dropped on the heads of the oarsmen? Or, maybe, they were set upon silently with knives?"

Khazov smiled but Lunikov shook his head reproachfully.

"You think that only happens in the films? All kinds of things can happen in wartime. Why, when we were in the Mekenzi Crimean mountains our cook managed to bring us hot borshch to the front lines. Well, it seems he was spotted and the Germans decided to bring him in for questioning. There was Melchuk walking through the oak grove —he knew the path well—and suddenly a tommy-gun pokes out of the thicket. 'Halt, Russ! Hands up!' Melchuk thought it was all up with him but he looks and sees there's only one German there. So he put on an act of being scared: 'Bitte, kaput, jawohl!'—and up goes his arms and the borshch with them. The German came out on to the path and at that moment Melchuk tips the whole pot over his head and that soup was all hot and fat, just off the stove, enough to have blinded him. That's the way he brought the German to me-all covered with bits of cabbage with the pot over his head. So you see, even borshch is a weapon of war..." Lunikov stubbed his cigarette and finished abruptly: "So that's all settled: when you bring the boat back you'll keep away from the cliffs. We'll have our eyes on you after the landing, whatever happens we'll wait till you're safely off. The rest depends on you; there's no point in guessing about it now. Only I want you to remember: if the boat doesn't get back to the sloop important things will be delayed. Very important things. And now let's turn in for a nap; look, that comrade's done the right thing," he nodded towards Lieutenant Voronin who, with his head back, was snoring away undisturbed by the light that shone right into his eyes. "Where's the switch?"

Lunikov switched out the ceiling light, curled up in a corner of the divan and closed his eyes.

But he was not given long to rest. The powerful low throb of the engines that filled the wardroom suddenly stopped, and there was no more of that vibration which set everything rattling and dancing; the silence felt complete although the engines went on murmuring quite distinctly. Lunikov opened his eyes and looked questioningly at Khazov, but saw that he was sunk in the sound sleep of a very tired man. There was still more than an hour and a half before the time fixed for the landing at Baffling Cove. Thinking that they had run into something awkward and expecting to hear the loud clang of the Action-Stations signal at any moment, he slipped off the divan. But then he felt as if some soft invisible hand was pushing him back, and the whole cabin rocked—the sloop was making a sharp turn. However, there was no signal and Lunikov decided to go on deck and ask the captain what this strange manoeuvre meant.

He found Reshetnikov in the chart-house, where the gunner on watch led him, gripping his elbow so hard that it hurt; evidently he was afraid Lunikov would stumble in the dark and fall overboard. Reshetnikov was marking something on the chart.

"Are we getting near, Captain? Isn't it a bit early?" Lunikov asked when Reshetnikov had finished.

"Everything's in order. The night's rather light just now though," replied Reshetnikov, pointing his pencil at a cape that jutted some way out into the sea. "We managed to spot it without any trouble this time—sometimes it takes an hour or two. . . . We'll stay here for the time being, and in an hour we'll sail to the cove—it's about forty minutes from the cape at half-speed. Look, we'll lie just there; it'll be easy for the boat to find the way in."

With the blunt end of his pencil he touched a circle with an anchor in it and, tracing the boat's course, drew it across the chart first to the outline of the coast and then along it leftwards, following the curve until it brought the pencil into the cove.

"Looks simple enough, doesn't it? You know what they say: entrance free but costs you a ruble to get out," drawled Lunikov, his eyes on the chart. "Ye-es, it looks lovely on the chart, but what's it going to be like in reality? What do you think, Comrade Lieutenant?"

"Nothing," Reshetnikov snapped and tossed his pencil down on the map with irritation. "What can I think? There's nothing worse than having to tidy up somebody else's mess. Somov lost a boat and now I have to risk the lives of my men."

The tone in which he spoke as well as the sense of his words and the unrestrained gesture with which he accompanied the outburst were in such marked contrast to his equable and happy manner during their recent talk in the wardroom that Lunikov looked at him with surprise. Naturally, he could not know what Reshetnikov had been thinking and worrying about during the past two or three hours.

Strange to say, at the beginning of the trip Reshetnikov had not taken what was happening very seriously. Perhaps that was mainly because from the six sloops lying at the base Vladykin had chosen his for this important operation. That could not but tickle his vanity and put him in that ex-

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cellent mood when everything looks simple and easily done. That was why the trip looked like being a quiet, even pleasant, outing across a calm sea gently heaving with a light swell; and the operation itself—a night landing followed by twenty-four hours of waiting out at sea and then coming back to the cove for the scouts—an amusing bit of child's play. He felt full of self-confidence and certain of success. It was in this happy mood that he joked at the supper table and searched the evening sky for his long-hoped-for green light.

But, left alone on the bridge and thinking about Baffling Cove, he experienced a mounting sense of alarm. It continued to envelop him until he realized fully that the cove had ceased to be a reliable landing place, that a really dangerous operation lay before him that night. And for this operation, so full of menace and oppressive, secret, unknown danger, he had exercised his will, his captain's authority to appoint a man whose life he had special reason to protect: for this man was his new-found friend.

And then all that youthful buoyant light-heartedness with which he had listened to Vladykin's briefing and had set out on this trip at once evaporated. Now he failed to understand how he could have yielded to that mood and played, almost theatrically, the role of the decisive quick-thinking captain, and how he could have replied "Boatswain Khazov" to Vladykin's question about whom he was thinking of putting in charge of the boat. How much he would have given now to take those words back! But the words had been spoken—not mere words but the decision of the captain of a ship, which could not be set aside or changed without weighty and important reasons. And there were no such reasons, except the inadmissible one that he was anxious about Khazov's safety.

He had been wrong to answer Lunikov as he had done, but from the first moment that he realized he was sending Khazov into danger he had not stopped thinking about the cove and the landing and the ambush or accident that might

be awaiting him there. Dozens of surmises, some plausible, others fantastic, poured into his mind but not one of them lodged there. He imagined dozens of plans to secure the safe return of the boat, but drew no succour from any of them. Too late, he thought, all of them ought to have been examined with Vladykin: then, maybe, some way might have been found to facilitate the night operation in the cove. Of all on board Khazov alone could have given him useful advice. But, of course, it was just to him that he must not give the least hint about his racking anxiety over the landing: he might transfer that anxiety to Khazov and undermine his nerve before he set out on that perilous operation.

For the first time in this happy month Reshetnikov felt a recurrence of those feelings of helpless bewilderment he had known during his first week in the sloop; and it was with bitterness that he realized that he had very far to go before he could call himself a real captain. And this had happened just when he had decided something without Khazov's help.... He cut his thoughts short as he realized it might be a matter not only of doing without Khazov now but for the rest of his life—and through his own fault.

That was the mood Lunikov found him in at the charttable where, leaving Mikheyev on the bridge, Reshetnikov had gone to work out on the chart a new way for the boat to find its bearings on the return journey. The idea had just occurred to him. Naturally, Lunikov's question could not solve his worries, but he realized immediately that he had permitted himself to be too sharp, and went on in a quite different voice:

"You named the place rightly, Comrade Major: Baffling it certainly is..."

"Baffling? No, not very..." mused Lunikov. "What do you think about this as a theory—that they played a trick on us? Let the landing party come ashore untouched but went for the boat?"

"Why should they do that?" asked Reshetnikov glumly. "War of nerves."

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"I don't follow."

"It's perfectly simple. They want us to rack our brains and get scared of this cove. They caught me, for example. Didn't I call it Baffling Cove? And Vladykin, too; with those alternative landing places he proposed it'd take a month of Sundays to reach them. And you've been caught, too—scared of risking your men. And there's nothing at all out of the ordinary in that cove."

"All the same, I don't see the point. It would be easier to wipe out the whole group. That would work on our nerves all right: we wouldn't use the place again."

"No, you're wrong there. We would go on using it. We would know that there was no regular garrison there and that the loss of the landing party was accidental. In other words, we could repeat the operation. But now it's a complete mystery: not a shot, not an explosion. . . . Danger's ten times worse if it's unknown. I can't speak for you, but I keep on asking myself what could have happened to that boat? It's probably my civilian profession that does it. You see, I'm a planning-engineer, so my mind's full of alternative versions. There are always thirty-two ways of doing anything. It's like that with this damn cove: in an hour we've got to land there and test the thirty-third version on our own hides. But I still go on working out new ones. . . ."

"So do I," Reshetnikov admitted frankly.

This seemed to cheer Lunikov up.

"Really, do you? And I was envying you. I was thinking: there's a professional Navy man for you! Going into such an enigmatic business and everything's so clear to him—not like me, an amateur warrior. So natural and gay...."

Now it was Reshetnikov's turn to smile.

"Well, I was envying you too, during supper; I was thinking if only I had your calm and confidence."

"So we understand each other perfectly," laughed Lunikov. "It must be an attribute of our rank—full of worries inside but not letting a hint of it to show. . . . As for me,

since I've got inside this tunic I've not felt alone a single minute. I always feel the three hundred pairs of eyes of my men on me: there he is, our Major, they seem to say, is he going to funk? And the worst thing of all is you can't fool them by putting on a bold front. They want the real thing. You must really be calm and brave and know how to make up your mind. And where am I to get all that from, you might ask? Up till now life has asked something else from me. So I've had to pick up these qualities for myself; I'm the wrong age for that and I haven't the knack anyway. Naturally I envy you professionals..."

Reshetnikov winced inwardly. He thought Lunikov was inviting a denial—Why do you say that, Comrade Major, we all know you're a real fighting officer? But Lunikov went on with a sincerity that disarmed all suspicion:

"To command men is a very difficult profession. A man in the ranks has only his own life to lay down, but an officer has thousands: just as many as he has men. It's easier at sea because there the captain goes into action with his men. It's hard for you even to understand how difficult it is to send your men under fire while you go on sitting snug in a dugout."

"Ah, I understand all right," sympathized Reshetnikov, thinking about Khazov and the boat.

"You don't understand a thing about it," retorted Lunikov. "Wait till you command a flotilla and have to send one of your sloops into some serious business, then you'll remember what I'm telling you. This time I'm lucky, I've come with the landing party. But if I'd stayed behind at Base I'd have worried myself sick imagining things. I doubt if even Seneca would have helped...."

"Seneca?"

"Yes, the Roman philosopher, Nero's tutor. He recommended people never to imagine anything unpleasant until it happened. He said there was enough filth in life for man to worry about without imagining more of it. Good advice, but mankind for some reason doesn't make much use of it, me included. I've just been discussing with your boatswain various ways of getting through this business tonight. Incidentally, he is evidently a philosopher himself: listened without saying a word and then went to sleep. Sleeping so hard, too, that you didn't wake him when you changed course."

The reference to Khazov drove Reshetnikov back to his gloomy thoughts. But Lunikov, who did not notice it, went on in the same jocular manner—a manner not very natural to him, but which he probably assumed to conceal his preoccupation.

"And so I couldn't really ask him how he was going to find the sloop on the return journey. The night's dark and the sea, after all, is Black. You'll have to put me wise."

"That's just what I was thinking about. I've got an idea," said Reshetnikov.

Among the disturbing questions which his imagination had so uselessly conjured up on the bridge, one had seemed to make sense: what if Somov's boat had simply failed to find the sloop?

With all its indisputable advantages as a place for a secret landing Baffling Cove had one grave shortcoming. A submerged reef made it necessary for the sloop to heave to some distance from the coast; so the oarsmen, rowing the boat back after effecting the landing operation, had to find their way out of the cove by compass, and then pick up the sloop by prearranged signal. In such cases where secrecy is essential a blue lamp is usually employed: its rays carry only a short distance. It occurred to Reshetnikov that deprived of their compass (it might have fallen overboard or been broken during the excitement of the landing) the oarsmen in the Somov boat might have looked for the sloop navigating by the stars. In that case the boat could have got sufficiently off course to take them out of sight of the feeble blue light.

Picturing Khazov in the same plight, he did not pause to consider the degree of probability in his theory. Only one thing seemed important: if such a thing were possible then steps would have to be taken to prevent it happening, although that meant solving a puzzle something like squaring the circle: how can a light be made stronger and at the same time camouflaged?

The sloop was drawing near to the coast, but Reshetnikov had found no solution. He felt quite desperate; then chance, which, it is well known, has been the cause of many important discoveries, came to his rescue. This time the role of Newton's apple was played by a ship's signal lamp: when Reshetnikov had moved to the side of the bridge in order to pick out more clearly the mountains looming dark against the twinkling sky, he heard the lamp rattling at his feet in its tin case, and this jogged his mind to a solution of his problem.

A signal lamp is built in such a way that its bright beam pierces the casing through a narrow slot protected, in addition, by shields which direct the beam and prevent the light being seen from the sides. As required, the slot may be covered with red, green or plain glass with the aid of a simple hand fixture. The idea that had struck Reshetnikov was that this beam could be directed parallel with the coast line. Then it would not be seen either from out at sea or from the coast, though the bright ribbon of light would certainly be picked up from the boat, even if they happened to cut across its path some distance from the sloop. Further, the camouflage would be all the surer, because, by being directed north-eastward, the beam would point straight along the reef where no German coastal defence sloop could appear, or any other vessel, for that matter.

Not without a certain sense of pride Reshetnikov outlined his plan to Lunikov, indicating on the chart where the sloop lay, in which direction the beam would strike and which course the rowers ought to take. Lunikov considered the plan silently for a time and then said: "There's one version you've overlooked. What if for some reason the boat turns up from the other direction—from the west? Then your plan doesn't work."

"That couldn't happen," replied Reshetnikov in the same tone. "For that she would have to be no less than twenty degrees off her course. And the course I've given her, as you see, is very simple: due south. Even if they lose their compass, all they have to do is to keep the Great Bear over the stern, and they can't mistake that. . . . Any other possibilities?"

"Not so far. But I have a suggestion. As you've got coloured glass in that lamp wouldn't it be better to show a green light? A reef's a reef, I know, but why invite trouble? A red light is too noticeable, the white is very bright, but if you use the green it might pass for a star.... It'll be a sort of camouflage...."

"Agreed, let it be green," replied Reshetnikov and, noticeably cheering up, glanced at his watch. "What do you think, Comrade Major, should we set off a little earlier?"

Lunikov looked at him out of the corner of his eye and smiled.

"All right. Why should we give ourselves an extra half hour to worry? If you're going to have a tooth out, it's best to get done with it."

Reshetnikov felt a little put out when he saw that Lunikov had sensed his impatience. As happens on such occasions he found it hard to wait for what was now bound to happen, and longed for it to begin as soon as possible. He blew down the speaking tube to the bridge and ordered Mikheyev to proceed in reverse and on reaching the cape to call Action Stations. Would he also send Khazov and Artiushin to him in the chart-house immediately?

Lunikov intended to leave, but the door swung open and the light was switched out. When it was switched on again both Khazov and Artiushin were standing in the charthouse. "I see," said Reshetnikov disapprovingly. "You were ordered to sleep but you were already on deck."

"Washed out of my bunk when the ship turned, Comrade Lieutenant," Artiushin flashed back. "I came on deck to tell Zykin to pay more respect to the wheel. You'll never make a helmsman out of him, whatever you do; he ought to be in the air force with those veers he's so fond of."

"Comrades Leading Seamen, receive my new instructions for the return journey," Reshetnikov broke in, and Artiushin at once stiffened to attention. "Come over here to the chart."

He explained his plan in detail, almost too elaborately, underlining that on no account should they pull off course to starboard, since that would make them pass the sloop on its dark side. He ended with the usual formula:

"Is that all clear? Any questions?"

He spoke precisely, as befitted a captain, and Artiushin replied with the same precision that everything was clear. Khazov, however, said slowly: "One question, Comrade Lieutenant."

"What is it, Nikita Petrovich?" Reshetnikov asked in a quite different tone and Artiushin, restraining the smile that rose involuntarily to his lips, noticed that the captain was anxiously watching the boatswain's left hand. And, sure enough, Khazov raised it to his chin with a familiar gesture and reflectively rubbed his palm along his clean-shaven cheek.

"Not much margin. There's a good deal of rowing to be done and it'll be hard to keep the boat on course. We might pass you on the starboard side."

"That's what Comrade Major's afraid of too," said Reshetnikov with concern. "My first idea was to heave to farther west, to be on the safe side, but I'm afraid you wouldn't see the light then. You'll be a fair way from the beam."

"We'll see it," said Khazov confidently.

"Yes, we'll see it," Artiushin affirmed. "You could see it all the way from Poti. It's not one of your blue night-lights

like the one we looked for till our eyes popped out of our heads last time."

"That's clear, then," said Reshetnikov summing up, and adding to the chart another little circle with an anchor in it. "Now you'll have thirty degrees to play with, that'll be enough. That's all, Comrades Leading Seamen. Remember, the success of the whole operation depends on you. If we lose the boat this time the whole sense of the operation goes: we've got to get the scouts back on board tomorrow night for certain. Well, good luck to you."

He shook hands with both men. Khazov took out of his pocket a small card and handed it to the captain without a word. Artiushin did likewise but he kept his papers in a pretty little pouch, evidently worked by feminine hands. Then both men left the cabin, followed by Reshetnikov and Lunikov.

On the deck they could sense the presence of many people in the darkness. Over the low throb of the one engine by which the sloop was now moving quiet voices could be heard, and shadows parted to let the officers pass on their way to the boat in the stern. Evidently the crew and the reconnaissance party alike had concluded from the sloop's second turn that the time for the landing was approaching, the signal for Action Stations was not really necessary: everyone was at his station, the boat was ready for launching and the scouts were dragging after them the cumbersome equipment of infantry fighting and trench life, which they would soon have to bear on their shoulders.

There had begun that intangible but clearly felt transition from one condition of life to another with which every military operation starts long before it is officially launched. And although people behaved as before, and talked to each other quietly, and cracked jokes, and carried out their respective duties, all these things now had a special significance that all felt but no one emphasized or even seemed to notice, as though they had formed a compact among themselves to pretend that definitely nothing was happen-

ing. Meanwhile, some of these people had already crossed that frontier beyond which death could be expected at any moment, while others remained on that side where there still was no immediate danger of death. However hard some of them tried to remain natural, to stay as they had been five minutes before, they were not very successful and the effort they were making expressed itself in various ways—in forced gaiety, studied calm, in bewilderment and awkwardness. Everybody was just as anxious as Reshetnikov that since this operation, in which they might meet their death, had to take place, then let it start quickly.

The sloop made another turn but this time evenly, at low speed. The stars rocked, then settled down overhead in such a way that the Great Bear stood to starboard; and from this everyone on deck realized that the sloop was creeping along the coast towards the cove. However, no one spoke of that aloud: the scouts were quietly consulting Lieutenant Voronin about whether they should take an extra drum of cartridges or add some hand grenades to their load; Zhadan was pressing the boatswain to give the scouts more to eat—there was, he said, plenty of soup over; but Sizov who had turned up somehow next to Artiushin asked him in a crestfallen voice:

"Getting close, aren't we?"

"What are you doing here?"

"I've been taking a radiogram to the bridge. We are getting near, aren't we?"

"Still a bit to go. You'll be able to tell us the last news bulletin."

"There's another hour till then."

"Then you won't manage it. Get back to your work."

Sizov fell silent. He touched Artiushin's elbow.

"Artiushin.... See that you ... you...."

"Come on, now, what's the matter with you?"

"Nothing, I'm all right. Well, so long, I've got to go back and listen."

"So long. Go on and listen."

Artiushin stood in the darkness. Softly, as if regretting he had let Sizov go, he called:

"Yura."

"Yes," a voice replied close by.

"You still here?"

"Yes."

"I told you to get back to your work."

"I went but you called me back."

"Well, so long. Call yourself a hero!"

From the bows a message reached the stern: "Quarter-master Artiushin to report to the bridge."

Artiushin repeated the order and throwing an arm over Sizov's shoulders gave the thin, still boyish body an affectionate squeeze. "Well, now we must be really close, seeing they're inviting the maestro himself.... Cheerio, Yura."

Artiushin had guessed right: the captain had ordered him to the wheel, as always happened when there was a complicated manoeuvre to be made. After having turned, the sloop had begun to drift a little with the swell and had to be kept firmly to her course if she was to reach the point a little west of Baffling Cove that Reshetnikov had selected.

Everything on the bridge was now directed to achieving this aim. Lieutenant Mikheyev was seeing that a steady speed was maintained and making periodical corrections to the number of engine revolutions. Ptakhov, relying on his eyes more than on binoculars, peered into the dark outline of the cliffs, hardly visible against the starlit sky, hoping that, like the last time, he would catch sight of the jagged height that rose not far from the cove. Reshetnikov himself, trusting Ptakhov's sniper eye, was bending over the compass: in spite of all the art of the "maestro" the card moved slowly to either side of the line of the ship's course and Reshetnikov was paying careful attention that the swing did not take the ship too far in either direction. The swing could be avoided only by increasing speed, but that was not permitted: they had to come up to the landing place quietly. Veering now to port, now to starboard, for all the

world as if it were sniffing its way along some track, the sloop moved cautiously along the coast.

Over half an hour was spent at that pitch of tension. Finally, Ptakhov exclaimed in low but undeniably triumphant tones: "The height—eighty to starboard."

Reshetnikov turned his binoculars on the point Ptakhov indicated and, although he saw nothing except a dark belt blotting out the stars on the horizon, he heaved a sigh of relief: that height told him that in six minutes they would reach the anchoring place. Playing a trick on himself, he added two or three minutes' sailing as a precaution that the boat should not pass west of the sloop. Then he swung the machine telegraph handle to "Stop" and quietly ordered the anchor to be lowered. He walked to the stern where he found almost all the crew gathered around boat, ready to launch it with the help of the scouts. The correctness of the captain's suggestion about using the lifejackets was fully vindicated; the stern, supported by the cork, did not even dip and when Khazov threw the lifejacket back on board the sloop, the scouts sprang into the boat in rapid succession and began sorting the oars without losing any time in baling.

Lunikov walked up to Reshetnikov and, missing his hand in the darkness, gripped him by the elbow in a friendly way.

"Well, Comrade Lieutenant, thank you for delivering us. We shall meet tomorrow. Remember Seneca as often as you can," he added, and Reshetnikov could sense the smile by his voice. Then the Major stepped to the side. "Hey, you down there! Take my foot and put it somewhere that isn't the sea."

He slithered rather awkwardly into the boat, and out of the darkness came Khazov's calm voice:

"May I cast off, Comrade Lieutenant?"

"Cast off," replied Reshetnikov with equal calm.

All the anguish of heart and mind that he had experienced on the bridge before making the turn near the cape

surged again from the depths of his being, where he had been trying to confine it. Had he been able to he would have kept the boat back or replaced Khazov with another man, with himself, perhaps. But that was not permissible, any more than it was permissible to delay the boat's departure with useless questions about whether they had taken everything needed with them, whether Khazov and Artiushin remembered that in emergency they should navigate by the Great Bear. There was only that one captain's phrase to say: "Cast off"—the fatal phrase that spelled the fate of others, the fate of his friend.

But he spoke that phrase in a calm, matter-of-fact tone. Strong arms pushed the boat clear. For a second its dark outline blotted out the reflection of the starlight glimmering on the oily waves of the swell, and then it was immediately swallowed up in the darkness surrounding the sloop.

For what seemed a very short time the quiet even splash of the oars was heard on the sloop. Then the faint noise faded as a glowing spark fades—unnoticed, yet with irrevocable finality. And then over the sloop hung that wonderful hush of the sleeping sea which cannot be broken by the rustle of a leaf as the silence of the forest can be broken, or by the rattle of a falling stone as in the mountains, or by the chirp of a bird in the grass as in the steppe. The stillness of the Black Sea night was so perfect that a light movement of air, barely palpable to the skin and felt only because it brought a touch of coolness, made itself heard like the sound of someone breathing lightly near by. It seemed outside the realm of possibility that the serene tranquillity of this night could be shattered by the dry rattle of gunfire, the chatter of automatic weapons or the dull thud of exploding shells.

But it was those sounds that Reshetnikov feared to hear as he sat on the depth-charge rack now free of the weight of the boat. Others were listening anxiously for those sounds—those of the crew whom Reshetnikov had allowed to remain on deck provided they refrained from the slightest

movement, cough or whisper that might muffle the faintest of noises coming from the beach or the water. Now and again Reshetnikov pulled up the sleeve of his coat and glanced at the luminous dial of his watch. And the nearer the hands approached the time when, according to his calculations, the boat ought to be reaching the beach, the more anxiously did he listen to the silence of the sea.

At length, unable to sit still another moment, he got up, as if that would help him to hear better. According to the time, the boat should have touched shore. And still there was not a sound to break the silence. Again he glanced at his watch: now they had probably all jumped out on to the pebbles. Khazov said last time that there was a smooth little stretch of beach in the cove that was very handy for landing. Well, three more minutes—they would be pushing the boat off now. All quiet. His heart was beating more evenly. He stood motionless for another five minutes, hearing only the light breathing of the wind. It was a cold wind; its sharp edge cut under the collar of his coat and made itself specially felt on the nape of the neck. Now the boat should be reaching the exit from the cove. His heart gave another leap; what if he had miscalculated the time and the boat had come out long ago and was now searching for the light of the signal lamp. He took another look at his watch: no, there was still plenty of time, at least twenty minutes. But as a precaution he would signal now.

"Bridge. Show a green light," he ordered quietly and started with surprise. Well, wasn't that extraordinary? How could he have failed to think of it before? The green light—his green light! He smiled to himself and completed his command: "Keep it pointing north-east."

Ptakhov's merry voice came back confirming the receipt of the order.

The sloop lay with its bows pointing eastward; that meant the light was invisible from the stern. But the men stirred with relief when they heard the orders. Chaika came up to Reshetnikov, then two others came, then someone stumbled in the darkness and Sizov's voice asked: "Are they on their way back, Comrade Lieutenant?"

"Let's suppose so," Reshetnikov replied cautiously.

"Comrade Lieutenant," Sizov went on. He was now quite close. "My watch is over and I've been ordered to turn in. But I can't sleep at a time like this. Please, may I wait on deck till Artiushin gets back?"

"Very well, stay here. Sit down over there. You're not supposed to use those legs of yours. How are they getting on?"

"They're all right again, Comrade Lieutenant."

"All right. Sit down and listen."

But Reshetnikov himself could not keep still. Now that the tenseness of the situation had somewhat diminished, he felt increasingly impatient. This silence signified nothing: hadn't Somov's boat disappeared in dead silence like this? There was nothing to do but wait, and waiting in these circumstances was very hard. Still harder to drive from one's head disturbing ideas about whether the boat would see the green light. It was like trying to force oneself not to think about the polar bear. All the most remote and inappropriate thoughts that he managed to dig out of his memory in order to distract him from those disturbing ideas immediately sprang out like tightly compressed springs that could not be confined, and invariably led him to pull back the sleeve of his coat and convince himself that no more than two or three minutes had passed.

Reshetnikov climbed to the bridge, glanced into the narrow slot of the lamp, which was casting a bright green light, consulted the compass to see whether Ptakhov was casting the beam in the right direction, had a word with Ptakhov himself and only then risked looking at his watch again. All that had taken four minutes. Time was dragging impossibly slow.

He sighed and decided to go into the deck-house where he had left the papers Artiushin and Khazov had given him. They lay in a pool of faint light on the chart where a

pencil line indicated the agreed path of the beam, almost parallel with the coast. Looking at it, Reshetnikov recalled how he had told Khazov about his green light and persuaded him not to miss a single sunset at sea, for one day he might catch sight of it. That must have been on that most memorable of days when he and Khazov had had their first heart-to-heart talk. Yes, that was the day. They had been walking together over to headquarters to fix the date of the first trial run after the repairs. Early in the morning the weather had suddenly turned cold and dense white clouds hung over the mountains surrounding the bay. They grew thicker and thicker, piling one above the other until by midday they were clinging to the mountain tops hiding them completely. The bay and the open sea beyond it took on a disagreeable lack-lustre shade of old lead. The nor'easter was tumbling the clouds down from the mountain to the sea; dense mist poured incessantly along the slopes towards the little town. Like some clotted liquid it flowed into every ravine, hollow and dell, reaching towards the houses and thrusting its tentacles into the gardens. Later on, the white mass splashed out of the hollows and came wreathing down, ready to envelop the town. But the moment it reached a certain limit, the wind whipping off the bay tossed it up and tore it to shreds with savage fury.

As they watched, Khazov had said something that Reshetnikov remembered now: "There's an evil power for you, one might say. But look—it's melting." And it was true; though the white clouds were countless in number and though behind their dense wall the presence of fresh, still greater masses of cloud, driving on the town from no one knew where, could be divined, there was no doubt that the strong steady wind from the sea was going to tear them to shreds and scatter throughout the heavens those ugly layers of cloud.

As Reshetnikov watched that white cloud he remembered other clouds that had hung black and lowering over the Altai steppe. It was then that he first told Khazov about his

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childhood and how he had decided to become a captain in the Navy. And it seemed to him that Khazov somehow looked at him with a new respect and that from that time onwards Khazov's attitude to him was completely changed. It was then he realized that Khazov could be the good friend Pyotr Ilyich had been to him for so short a time.

While thinking over these things Reshetnikov mechanically looked at Khazov's Party card. He noted with surprise that in the photograph Khazov not only looked younger which was to be expected—but a completely different man. Though the picture was small it was very clear: even the expression of the eyes could be detected. They were calm and serene and the face bore not a trace of that look of brooding concentration and gloomy reserve to which Reshetnikov had become accustomed from the day he met Khazov. All that, evidently, was the result of the war. There was another small photograph loose in the card. It was of a boy and at first Reshetnikov thought it was Khazov himself, so much did it resemble the Khazov of those days when the photograph in the Party card had been taken. But on the back he saw written in uneven handwriting: "From Pyotr Khazov to Kostya Chigir," and underneath, an anchor with the date 1940 standing on the arms and underneath that the word "Alliance" with an exclamation mark.

In the picture this romantic Pyotr looked about ten or eleven. It was hard to imagine that he was Khazov's son for no one on board had ever heard of him having a son: and Khazov would have been only eighteen or nineteen when he was born. Evidently it was his younger brother, though Khazov had never mentioned having one. Reshetnikov looked again at that open, bold and remarkably attractive face, which had something in it that one involuntarily remembered, and put the photograph back in its place.

But that had taken only a bare three minutes. He left the deck-house and stood near it while his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness. Then he went back to the stern and sat down beside Sizov.

"Will we have to wait much longer, Comrade Lieutenant?" Sizov asked at once.

Reshetnikov looked at his watch.

"Not much longer. They ought to manage it in about ten minutes."

"Wish they'd hurry," Sizov sighed quite childishly, and Reshetnikov smiled. Evidently, Artiushin meant to Yura Sizov what Yershov had meant to him once.

But ten minutes, twenty minutes passed, and still the boat did not return.

The deck filled up with people again, and again they stood there silent and motionless. Again that absolute stillness reigned—everybody was waiting for that faint, barely audible, even splash of the oars.

The time limits Reshetnikov had set for his own peace of mind were passed one after the other. Two hours had gone since the time the boat should have reached the sloop. A feeling of terrible anxiety possessed him. Good that it was dark: he felt he was trembling and quaking in every limb, his nerves were on edge, that would certainly have been noticed. All those conjectures and doubts he experienced on the outward trip assailed him again. The worst of them was the thought that the boat might have passed west of the sloop, on the side where the green light would not have been visible. That could not have happened, he knew that; that would have meant keeping the Great Bear not over the stern but practically fully to starboard of the boat. But, in spite of his certainty, he had to check himself calling out to the bridge: "Light a second signal lamp to south-west." But that might have spelled the destruction of the sloop; a light in that direction would certainly be spotted by the enemy. That he could not do. In fact, there was nothing he could do. He was condemned to complete inactivity. He who, to help Khazov in misfortune, was ready to face shot and shell, or fling himself into the sea, could do nothing but wait.

During all this time not a single man plagued him with

the idle, futile question: where is the boat? Everybody kept silent; yet Reshetnikov knew that the question was in everyone's mind.

And he kept silent too.

Now he was bitterly reproaching himself with the intolerable thought, terrible to acknowledge, that by his own orders he had deprived himself of his new-found friend.

He smiled wryly as he recalled Lunikov and his talk about Seneca: he would like to see how Lunikov would have coped with this swarm of terrifying visions floating about him here in the silence of the sea which had swallowed up the boat without a trace.

Thinking of Lunikov, he pulled himself together. "That is our responsibility as captains..." As captain it was his duty to give his men some explanation.

With an effort of will he drew himself up.

"Something's gone wrong," he told the men near him, and he was surprised to find how calmly he was speaking. "Well, we have some time in hand; dawn's a long way off. We shall wait till then."

And he resumed his seat on the depth-charge rack. A shiver ran down his spine as if he was cold—and, indeed, the second half of the night was much colder. Or was it the chill of anxiety? He turned up his coat collar and sat stockstill.

So many times did he imagine he was hearing the distant, barely audible splash of the oars that he decided to stop listening: if something was heard the others would tell him. Now he recalled what Vladykin had said to him the day before, during the briefing: "Isn't it about time to think of that order concerning Khazov's promotion? It would look better if you raised the question. Put in your report after your next scrap." Reshetnikov had asked: "Maybe after this trip?" Vladykin had smiled and said that you could not promote a man to officer's rank for a little outing like that.... Everybody thought this was going to be an outing. Hadn't he thought the same, there on shore?

.s. 7... All this passed in his mind as if across the top of a screen—the rest of his mind was occupied by the single question, fixed and unanswered: where is the boat? And, as fixed as the thought, Reshetnikov's gaze was pinned on the bows of the sloop, as he peered into the darkness for that dark outline, blotting out the reflection of the glittering stars, that would be the boat. But this long-awaited patch on the water did not appear and it was appalling to think that it might never appear.

Time dragged so slowly that it seemed to have run to a standstill. But, evidently, that was not so: the stars in the firmament had shifted considerably, changing their bright dotted pattern. Reshetnikov even thought the sky had grown paler. Surely it could not be the dawn and with it the end to their waiting, to what little hope remained? No, the constellations were as bright as ever and the eastern sky had not yet started to turn grey. The darkness consoled him: it meant there was still time, time to wait, to hope.... He gazed into the darkness with but one wish—that it would not grow light.

Suddenly the darkness was torn by the silent flash of a huge, broad, pinkish-yellow light that for a second lit up half the sky over the coast. It flashed, then disappeared. Reshetnikov was still wondering whether he had imagined it when the sky rocked with the roar of the explosion.

It flung him off the rack. Picking himself up he was about to rush he did not know where when he found Sizov standing at his side.

"What was that, Comrade Lieutenant?" he shouted. "Was it our fellows?"

The men standing in the stern said nothing but Reshetnikov could feel they were asking themselves the same question.

"It's too early to say," he said in an unnatural voice. "Perhaps it's just a coincidence, or perhaps.... Anyhow, we'll wait. As I said we'll stay here till dawn."

Sizov suddenly choked with a sob. Reshetnikov flung his arm round the boy's narrow shaking shoulders.

"Now then, Yura, Yura.... You're a sailor, remember. And nothing's certain yet. Chin up, Yura."

But Sizov was inconsolable.

"All right, someone take him below," said Reshetnikov in that unnatural voice, adding loudly: "Bridge there. Keep that lamp straight to north-east. Don't let it point to the coast."

Back came Ptakhov's confirmation and Reshetnikov sat down again on the depth-charge rack.

If only he could give vent to his feelings. He would sob as Yura was sobbing, the way he had done seven years ago. But all he could do was to sit in silence or speak in that unnatural voice, in the firm voice of a ship's captain. And as captain he could not take his unhappiness to a deck-house or a cabin. It was his duty to stay here, on deck with his men. He had to stare at that unheeding blaze of stars and listen to the calm silence of the sleeping sea, in which such explosions seemed inconceivable. And he had to pretend that nothing was certain, that there was still some point in waiting, though he knew full well that the explosion had occurred almost in the entrance to the cove if not in the cove itself.

Still he could think, couldn't he? But what could he think of? As in those years—which way to go in life?

Ah, there was no question of that now. For the second time in his life war had robbed him of a friend. He had to live to prevent war from going on killing. He had to live to put an end to war—or, rather, to those who unleash it on the world where it roams and roars, burns and slaughters, smothers and drowns, destroys. He had to live to avenge both his lost friends.

But that, after all, was something personal. His private sorrow. Other people's sorrows filled whole towns, regions, entire republics. And it wasn't, actually, a matter of vengeance but of preventing slaughter. Of putting an end to this war and not letting anyone start another one. That's the only thing to be done in life.

So he had grown up a little more. The last time it was his childhood that had ended; now the days of his youth were over.

Well, he would wait till dawn. At dawn he would raise anchor and leave, without knowing what had happened to his friend. He was an officer and, besides these two, there was a whole ship with her crew.

In the tranquil, silent, starlit Black Sea night a small ship of war lay off the south coast of the Crimean Peninsula, and on its stern sat a young man in an officer's coat, his head drooping as he gazed into the oily-black water like a man gazing into an open grave. And from the bridge of that cockle-shell of a ship a thin sharp green beam, maybe forgotten, maybe left on out of sheer stubbornness, went on sending its futile signal along the coastal reef.

## CHAPTER TEN

Casting off from the sloop, the boat set on a course almost due north and moved rapidly towards the coast under the strong, sustained pull of six of the scouts. Two more of them sat with Lieutenant Voronin in the bows grasping their guns. In the stern, room was found for Lunikov, Khazov, Artiushin and the compass.

This small appliance was being treated with special respect. A separate place was cleared for it on the seat; and for its sake all the weapons were stacked in the bows so that their harmful proximity should not interfere with its useful work. It alone was allowed a light: its card was illuminated by the blue beam of a pocket torch, ingeniously fixed in the lining of its housing. It had its own regular source of illumination in the form of a concealed oil lamp but the feeble-

ness of this light did not suit Artiushin and he had attached the torch to make it easier to keep on course.

The entrance to Baffling Cove was complicated by the presence of a high submarine shelf that ran parallel to the coast in front of the cove, more or less cutting it off from the sea, for it rose almost to the surface and was dangerous even for a boat. For that reason the boat had to skirt it, leaving it on the left, and then pass between it and the coast up to the entrance of the cove. That the boat was now doing, steering by compass.

Strict silence was maintained in the boat, a silence broken only by the rhythmical monotonous sound of the oars: the splash of the blades in the water, the creaking of the boat's timbers as they shook at the end of each stroke when the oar gives the last heave before leaping from the water. Khazov who was sitting beside Artiushin gazed intently ahead. At last, without saying a word, he placed his hand on the tiller, and Artiushin as silently removed his own and switched out the little lamp on the compass case. The boat was nearing the coast and was now in the hands of the navigator who had need of no compass nor of the art of a stylish steersman; "even the boatswain can be a navigator," as Artiushin had told Lunikov on the sloop. Bringing the boat so close to the cliffs that they shut out the starlit sky, Khazov turned left and then followed the coast line. When the cliffs retreated, the boat, as if following them, also veered to the right, slightly at first, then more sharply, until the Great Bear was again directly over her bows.

This, then, was the entrance to the cove. "Rest on your oars!" Khazov ordered quietly.

The scouts stopped rowing and raised the blades above the water. The boat glided on silently. Voronin and the two men in the bows rose with their guns in their hands. Artiushin whispered to the leading oarsman: "Pass the guns along here," and the oarsmen passed along two automatic rifles and several hand grenades from the bows. Khazov let the boat drift to the middle of the cove which he guessed by some sign of his own, then moved the tiller and in a low voice ordered: "Backwater with the left, right oars clear..." and, waiting until the boat had swung round and its bows faced the way out of the cove, he added: "Backwater with both oars. Steady."

Now the boat was moving slowly to the shore stern first, ready to make a swift escape in case of emergency. Khazov silently lifted the rudder off its hooks and laid it in the boat, then he picked up a couple of hand grenades and turned to face the shore. Guns in hand Artiushin and Major Lunikov took up positions in readiness for landing.

The utter silence of the cove was broken only by the water splashing against the stones: a slight swell was breaking on the shore. The air in the cove was practically motionless and for this reason, perhaps, the sharp nip in the night air made itself felt less. Without the reflection of the stars—hidden by the overhanging cliffs—the water looked black. Drawn by the silent strokes of the oars, the boat cautiously approached the shore. Without turning or saying a word Khazov, who was watching the rocks in the darkness, kept touching the knee first of the left, then of the right oarsman with a hand grenade. This was a signal that one or other side was to stop rowing as Khazov manoeuvred the boat in his search for that little pebbly beach he knew was somewhere there.

At last the stern grated on the pebbles. The boat stopped and rose very slightly on a lazy wave running up the sloping beach. Lunikov was about to spring ashore but Khazov restrained him. For half a minute he stood motionless, listening to the darkness. Then he turned and whispered:

"That's all. Keep the oars out of the way, don't make a noise."

He threw his legs over the gunwale, carefully found a footing in the cold water and with a sudden heave drew the boat to him. The stern slid up the pebbly slope.

"All right. Get out," he whispered to Lunikov.

The landing operation itself did not take more than two or three minutes. Springing ashore the first two scouts at once disappeared in the darkness, deploying along the beach to reconnoitre the position. The rest of the men sorted out their arms in silence and loaded themselves with their infantry equipment. Lunikov drew Khazov to him by the sleeve of his coat.

"Thank you, Boatswain. Looks as if we've arrived. I hope you have a good trip back. Remember—it's essential we reach the sloop tomorrow night. We shall expect you here."

"I'll remember," replied Khazov tersely. "Good luck, Comrade Major."

"Be very careful how you leave the cove. Although," and here there was a smile in Lunikov's voice, "that idea of mine about the knife attack was pure cinema, I admit. It's so dark there, you wouldn't be able to distinguish the boat from the water.... Well, let's hope everything else will go as well. Pull out, don't waste time."

Khazov sprang nimbly into the boat. Artiushin who had remained in the boat had now placed the compass on the seat nearest the stern and had re-arranged his torch accordingly. The value of his invention had been fully vindicated last time: sitting at his oar on the middle seat, he was able to keep on course while still rowing, something he could not have done by the faint light of the regular lamp.

The scouts came up to the stern of the boat to push her off but Artiushin whispered fiercely:

"It's not May for you to be bathing. We'll push ourselves off. Well, you gallant land-lubbers, good luck to you."

Driving their oars into the sand the two of them easily pushed the lightened boat out from the shore. It moved fast, and the scouts were soon swallowed up in the darkness. Artiushin sat down and dropped his oar into the rowlock.

"Same arrangement as before, then: you're pilot in the cove but in the open sea I take over as navigator. Strike!" And they pulled the first stroke together.

Rowing a boat with two oars and no rudder is no easy matter. The oarsmen have to work together very harmoniously, and have the feel of each other if they are not to outrow each other and take the boat off course. When the oarsmen are inexperienced it sometimes happens that in trying to equalize their strokes they spend their strength too quickly; at other times in yielding to each other they lose direction and it ends up with them throwing down their oars and turning on each other with angry eyes and mutual recriminations.

Being experienced and efficient seamen Khazov and Artiushin did not even think of such things. They had only to pick up the oars for their muscles to find for themselves a common level of exertion that suited them both; and as a result a rhythm established itself in their rowing and the boat went smoothly, without jerking or deviating from its course, though, of course, it went less swiftly than when it entered the cove, for three pairs of oars had been at work then. As agreed, Khazov was steering at this stage of the journey. That meant that Artiushin had to row steadily without varying his stroke while Khazov had to lengthen or shorten his as required. In this way the boat could be kept on course or brought back to it in case of deviation.

Khazov rowed keeping his head turned to the right to watch the cliffs, clearly outlined in the starlight. The boat had to keep close inshore so that they could find the outlet of the cove and then that particular point on the coast where the steep cliffs gave way to a smooth pebbly beach. Here there was no longer any danger of fouling the submerged reef and they could safely turn into the open sea; and here Khazov's duties as navigator would finish: the boat would turn due south and it would be Artiushin's job to steer by compass until they met the beam of the lamp.

They rowed in silence. The vague bulk of the cliffs moved slowly on their left. Rising and falling on the swell, the boat moved at uneven speed. Then Khazov stopped rowing and the boat, with only one oar at work, began to veer to the

left out of the cove. Suddenly, with a brief oath, Artiushin crooked his elbow and raised his oar high into the air.

Khazov turned to him.

"What are you doing?"

"A mine.... A great brute of a mine."

A round black object floated past the boat, right up against its side. Artiushin had seen it, or, rather, sensed it when, turning his head to his left shoulder, he had withdrawn his blade at the end of his stroke. The gesture with which he had snatched the oar from the rowlock had been quite involuntary. It was improbable that the light blow of the oar would have touched off the mine, but if the boat had struck it head on. . . .

Thinking what might have happened Artiushin shook his head and readjusting his oar laughed rather unnaturally.

"We're in luck, Boatswain, I must say. How the hell did that get here? There's no mine-field round these parts, is there?"

Khazov did not reply. Artiushin felt like adding that on the next day they would have to pass that accursed mine again twice, now that it had got stuck in the cove and could not float on. But on reflection he decided to keep that discovery to himself: the unwritten laws in wartime forbade one sharing such thoughts with one's comrades-in-arms—you stumble on a thought, and—well, you keep it to yourself and don't start putting the wind up others. What's more, he tried not to think about it himself. After all, there was nothing to be done: they couldn't touch the mine off by firing at it, or dismantle it or sink it. To banish these futile thoughts he began to count strokes. He reached two hundred. By then, he figured, the boat ought to have reached the end of the submerged reefs.

"Oughtn't we to have turned by now, Boatswain?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;The cliffs haven't finished yet."

<sup>&</sup>quot;We've been going a long time."

<sup>&</sup>quot;It's the swell."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Let's carry on then."

But Khazov did not even reply.

It was too dreary to go on counting strokes, but they must have taken a good hundred more when Khazov at last broke his silence.

"Here's the beach. Give us the course."

Artiushin stopped rowing and leaned over the compass to switch on his ingenious lighting arrangement. Khazov gave two pulls and brought the boat's bow round to the open sea.

"Going to be long there?" he asked.

"These miracles of engineering!" Artiushin replied in confusion. "Looks like the leads have slipped out. I told Yura he should have made them longer."

"Light the oil lamp. It'll be surer."

"Oh, I'll be only a minute, and then it'll be plain sailing. I'll fix it in a tick."

Artiushin's torch, a gift from some scout, was usually recharged by Sizov, who used elements out of a "Bas-80"—"eighty-volt dry anode battery"—of which, like all wireless operators, he had plenty to spare. But perhaps because Sizov had been worrying about the impending landing, or because he had been in too much of a hurry, the torch refused to work this time. Artiushin had to open it and by feel alone attach the leads to the contact points.

Khazov did not pester him: a minute or two longer would make no difference and it would be so convenient to have that light on the compass that the delay was worth while. He sat resting, his hands lying at ease on his oars, and he looked at the Great Bear whose tail dangled right over the stern. The boat moved lazily on the swell. All around them the deepest silence reigned; there was not even that faint splashing of the waves against the rocks which had been audible in the cove.

Suddenly it seemed to him that some of the stars below the Great Bear were hidden. He looked hard. One after another the stars on the edge of the sky were disappearing, as if a dense impenetrable cloud were swallowing them up. Another minute passed before he realized that it was the cliffs that were blotting out the stars—those very cliffs which they had already rowed past on their way to the beach.

"Artiushin, take your oar," he said loudly.

"In a minute. I've fixed it. I'm going to switch on."

"Row, I said. We're drifting back."

Artiushin grabbed his oar. They turned the boat parallel to the coast again and rowed on. Then Khazov gave the order to stop rowing and looked carefully at the cliff-face. The moment they stopped rowing the boat began to drift back. They had to pull fairly often to keep it in the same place.

"Row away," said Khazov, "we'll run ashore."

Again they started pulling and brought the boat back to the place where they had recently turned. But now many things they had not noticed before indicated the speed of that unexpected current: the slowness with which the cliffs moved and the extra effort required of them. Artiushin even thought he saw the water rippling along the side of the boat as if they were rowing not at sea but in a river with a rather swift current.

Actually, that was what was happening: the boat was being carried back by an invisible river.

The day before SK 0944's departure for Baffling Cove a south-west gale had just blown itself out. For three days running all that enormous volume of water that is the Black Sea had been in violent and constant motion. Throughout its length, from the Bosporus to Kerch, there had probably not been a single patch of water which had remained calm. The ponderous mass of salt water had rocked and heaved up and crashed down in a turbulent succession of mountains, hollows, hillocks and yawning precipices. The gale, sweeping over the tattered surface of the raging sea, hounded the waves in one direction. The white-caps pursued one another in a general race with the ragged low clouds streaming north-eastward.

In reality, only the clouds were on the move. The waves flowed nowhere, and neither rolled nor ran, they just heaved

up and down in the same place, constantly changing their appearance and creating an impression of being on the run. However, a shallow layer of water did move along with the gale towards the coasts of the Crimean and Taman peninsulas. And, despite the size of the Black Sea, the displacement of this shallow layer driven by the wind towards its north-eastern corner was sufficient to raise the sea level there considerably and to set counter-currents in motion.

This process began the moment the force of the gale slackened. The sea was still heaving with a slight swell and settling down while the mass of water which the storm had been driving before it for three whole days was on its way back, south-westward. Invisible slow-flowing rivers moved across the Black Sea in different, arbitrary directions, depending on local coast winds, the temperature of the layers of water they met and the contour of the sea bed.

One of these counter-currents originated in the Bay of Feodosia where the gale had driven a particularly large volume of water, and from there it was flowing along the Crimean coast. It had stirred a black thick-skulled mine which lay in its path floating on the surface. At first the mine merely rolled lazily, then, thinking better of it, started to move and floated with the current. Short strands of broken cable hung loosely from its belly: two days previously the gale had torn it from the anchor to which it had been attached for over a year, "protecting" the Soviet coast from Soviet ships and waiting only for the touch which would awaken the yellow and black death that slept in its maw. Rocking evenly on the slackening swell the mine drifted along the coast westward all the next day. In the evening it was carried into the cove near the mouth of which the rocks projected into the sea. Encountering this obstacle, the current took a rather sharp turn and the mine, caught in one of the eddies, floated out of the main stream into the quiet waters of the cove. It could not return to the main current streaming past and, pushed by chance little currents that happened to enter the cove, kept describing uncertain curves, loops and spirals among the rocks as it rose and fell gently on the still turbulent waters.

It was this mine that the boat met, and all but struck, as it emerged from the cove. But its appearance was no greater a surprise to the two men sitting in that boat than their discovery that a strong current was flowing westward along the coast. All the same, they tried with their two oars to move the clumsy boat against the current, not realizing that actually they were pitting their strength against the Black Sea which in re-establishing its normal level after the storm was shifting an immeasurably vast mass of water from one of its corners to another.

Without going into the real reasons for the way the boat was drifting, Khazov at once started to act in what was the only right and proper way in such circumstances. The first thing was to get to shore so that the boat could be kept at the point they had managed to row to, and then they must try to work out what had happened, and what they ought to do next. They could not land immediately; the sheer cliffs and the rocks at their foot ruled that possibility out. But when they had fought the powerful current and brought the boat past the last rock Khazov swung it round and drove the bow into the pebbles of the sloping beach.

"Well, let's put on our thinking caps. We'll start by noting the time," he said, calm as ever.

Artiushin flashed his torch on his watch.

They discovered it had taken them about half an hour—almost twice as long as on the last landing—to reach this point on their return journey. That itself was sufficiently indicative of the strength of the current and fully proved the seriousness of their situation. The fact that the current ran along the coast, that is, in a westerly direction, meant that when they began to row to the sloop the drift would be more than they could cope with: it would be moving at right angles to their course.

"It'll carry us past the ship," said Khazov, making a simple mental calculation. "We'll not manage it rowing."

"We pulled her here all right," dissented Artiushin. "It's running so fast because of the coast. If it was as fast out there we'd have been on the reef."

"We were, as a matter of fact."

"You're telling me." Artiushin was hurt.

"I didn't want to shame you. Don't you know where you brought the boat? I thought your compass must've been wrong but it was the current."

Artiushin recalled that the boat, contrary to the plan, which should have brought it to the sloping beach marking the edge of the submerged reef, had, in fact, reached the coast at a place where there were high cliffs. At that time he had taken them to be the cliffs at the edge of the beach and had attached no special importance to what he took to be a slight error in navigation. But now he saw things in a different light.

"So that's what happened," he admitted. "We must have drifted fifteen degrees, no less. But how is it we didn't go aground?"

"Such things happen. Think of that mine."

"Well, allow thirty degrees for the drift and we'll reach the ship all right," said Artiushin confidently. "'Course, it'll mean some hard rowing."

"It's beyond our strength. Take us nearly an hour. We won't do it with two oars: why, we were drifting when we had six."

For a short while neither man spoke. Then Artiushin said: "Probably comes from the Sea of Azov. Driven by the storm. It's all quite clear."

"That's no comfort."

"It's a scientific discovery all the same. That other boat—must have been carried away too. Remember? There was a storm the day before that happened."

"Yes, that's what happened, seeing it left shore for the sloop. Well, what are we going to do? Time's passing."

A deep and utter silence brooded over the pebbly beach stretching to the east. On the other side of the boat an oar,

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left in the rowlock with its blade resting on the water, moved slightly. Both shore and sea, as if in repose after the ordeal of the recent storm, preserved a wonderful calm under stars which traced their silent course in the sky, distant worlds twinkling and scintillating at play. And the two men sitting in the boat also seemed to be resting, placidly awaiting the one who was to come to that appointed place, so calm were the brief phrases they exchanged now and again, so casual were their attitudes. One of them lolled on the seat as if counting the stars, the other sat comfortably leaning on his elbows, stroking his chin and cheek with his palm.

Meanwhile in that peaceful starlit night a group of marines were scrambling up the coastal cliffs into the mountains, bound on a mission whose success depended on that boat; and in the sea, a mile from the coast, lay a sloop whose further activities depended on the boat's return; and far away, in Moscow, people who were directing the course of the war were awaiting the results which the reconnaissance group of marines and the crew of the sloop had to achieve, results that were required to improve the military situation of a vast country and its many millions of people. The carefully calculated course of this seemingly unimportant little operation had been suddenly upset by a natural phenomenon which could in no circumstances have been foreseen: the freakish turn of a current raised by the after-effects of a storm in the north-eastern part of the Black Sea.

This break in the course of the operation was something that could not be put right by the Captain of the sloop, by the combat officer who had been put ashore with the scouts, or by all the vast authority, experience and knowledge of the military and state personalities who were directing the course of the entire war. That could be done only by those two men sitting in the boat—two Soviet men in naval uniform, two Communists.

Those men were trying to decide what they could do in this particular difficult situation. And although the terse phrases they exchanged betrayed no hint of the fact that they both understood and felt their responsibility for the success of the operation—the real significance of which they were unaware of—everything they said had one aim: to correct the course of that operation upset by the consequence of the storm.

They examined several solutions, only to reject them. The circle continued to contract. It began with their realizing clearly that it was now impossible to row back to the sloop in the boat. To wait until the current changed or grew weaker was also ruled out: that was as likely to happen in an hour as in a day. Then they considered another variation: to leave the boat, hiding it among the rocks, and the next day to take it under cover of darkness to the cove the scouts were to come back to. That was Artiushin's plan and at first Khazov snatched at it. Of course, there was a serious element of risk in it: if the boat was spotted, then an ambush would inevitably be laid for the scouts. But Khazov then remembered that when he was bringing the boat out of the cove that night he had noticed something like a grotto under the overhanging cliff—a place where it would be quite possible to hide the boat by sinking it to the level of the gunwale.

"Yes, we could scuttle it," said Artiushin gaily, "and tomorrow, as soon as it got dark, we could start baling. It'd keep us warm, at least. Let's go."

He had his hands on the oar when Khazov stopped him with the question:

"What about the sloop?"

"What about it?"

"How will they know on the sloop that they'll have to come back for us tomorrow?"

Artiushin let go the bar.

Yes, he thought, Reshetnikov would have to leave his anchorage after waiting till dawn for the boat, just as Lieutenant Somov had done. He knew that in the morning Lunikov was going to get in touch with the sloop by radio; that

meant Reshetnikov would tell him about the loss of the boat and Lunikov would not take his scouts to the cove. So, in fact, it was pointless to hide the boat.

"What about the torch?" Artiushin said suddenly.

"What about it?"

"We could signal to the sloop. In Morse. We could let them know that way."

"Not allowed."

"I know it's not allowed. But there are times when rules don't count."

"Can't be done, I'm telling you. Our orders are not to reveal ourselves in any way."

"But it'd only take a moment, Boatswain. Just a wink and Ptakhov would pick it up straightaway."

"What are you going to tell 'em in a wink?"

Artiushin pondered. But however much he juggled with the words of the message they would have to transmit, he saw that he would need much more than a "moment"—a full minute, at least. Besides, the sloop would have to reply. That would be enough to wreck the whole operation. Twiddling his torch in his hands he sorrowfully laid it on the seat.

"So that trick won't work. Let's think of another."

And he again set his mind to the problem of how to get the boat to the sloop. He suggested rowing it against the current for a mile along the beach. True, that would take about an hour, but it would provide a guarantee that the boat would not be carried past the ship. However, when Khazov asked him whether he felt capable of pulling for something more than two hours without a single minute's break—hard rowing, too, since every moment they took it easy would mean drifting a bit more—he immediately dropped his proposal and made a new and quite different one

"Then let's scuttle the boat and go into the mountains. Maybe we'll find the partisans in the morning and then the Major will tell the sloop to send another boat for them tomorrow night—and that would settle the business."

Khazov was silent for a moment.

"Now, we don't know where to look for them. But you're right about sending that other boat."

"I don't follow."

"The sloop will have to go back to base for one, that's what I mean. It's got plenty of time to do that before to-morrow night."

"That's just what I'm saying."

"Not exactly. We'll have to swim for it back to the sloop, that's what."

Now Artiushin fell silent. He was thinking.

"But the current would carry us off course, too," he said at length. "Worse than the boat."

"But what d'you say if we go against the current? Not in the water though, but on shore. It'll be much quicker and we won't tire ourselves."

Artiushin weighed up his words.

"We'd have to go a kilometre and a half along the shore. Then we'd not be carried past her. It's only that the water's cold."

"Never mind. It'll make us swim faster."

"That's true. So that's agreed then."

"It's the only way," said Khazov.

"Wait a minute. It's not too far to swim. A mile. But the water's cold. We'd be surer in the boat, after all. Let's think again."

They sat down again and thought for a minute, turning over in their minds all the plans they had already rejected and searching for new ones. Suddenly Artiushin laughed and slapped himself on the knee.

"What chumps we are! There's nothing to think about: you sit at the tiller and I'll put the painter over my shoulder and run along the shore."

He spoke with such happy conviction that Khazov involuntarily sprang up to move to the stern. Of course, the right way to do things was to haul the boat along the shore by the painter—the way boats are hauled upstream on riv-

ers. That way they would save time and their strength, not to mention the boat itself.

But for that to work the beach would have to stretch for at least a kilometre and a half. And on Reshetnikov's insistence—the Captain was following Lunikov's example—Khazov had made a close study of the map after supper that night. He remembered that the beach turned into rocks some five hundred metres farther on. They could manage it on foot beyond that point but there would be no way of dragging the boat by its short painter. And that would mean forty minutes rowing anyway.

Khazov explained all this briefly to Artiushin. Artiushin said nothing but sprang out of the boat.

"Where're you going?" asked Khazov.

"Going to get some stones. You take the guns out."

They both set to trying to make up for lost time. As a precaution they placed heavy boulders in the boat, then they hid their guns, the hand grenades and the compass among the rocks so that if all went well they would be able to pick them up again the next night. Artiushin removed the oil lamp from the compass case and stood it on the pebbles inside his cap together with the torch.

Khazov pulled out the sea-cock and the water spouted unseen into the boat. Jumping out he pushed the boat towards deep water under the cliffs.

"How's the time?" he asked.

Artiushin switched on his torch. They had spent twentyfour minutes drawing up their plan of action, removing the weapons from the boat and filling it with stones.

"We've been messing about too long," grumbled Khazov and immediately set off striding along the beach. "Coming? We'll have to hurry. It'll warm us, and we've time to make up."

Artiushin picked up his cap and the compass lamp and, almost at a run, caught Khazov up. He fell into step and strode beside him. The pebbles ran rattling away from their feet. Khazov set at a good pace and soon both of them

were warm, almost hot. For five minutes neither man spoke. Then Khazov noticed that Artiushin was carrying something.

"What have you got there?"

"I took the oil lamp out of the compass case."

"What, another lamp?"

"We'll smear ourselves with the oil. I read about one long-distance swim. You've got to smear yourself. Keeps the cold out. Like swimming in a jersey."

Not another word did they exchange as they hurried through the night on the empty beach. Nothing could be heard except the crunch and rattle of the pebbles underfoot. Sometimes they walked on sand smoothed by the breaking waves, and then walking was easier, for their feet sprang resiliently, but then they would be back in the yielding mass of small round pebbles. Later rocks rose more frequently in their path, and they had to go round them if they did not want to wade waist-high in the sea; then the shore grew steep and three or four times they had to scramble up the cliffs. Finally they reached another level beach and here Khazov stopped abruptly.

"How long have we been going?"

"Eighteen minutes."

"Far enough?"

"Yes, we made good time. Must have covered over a kilometre and a half."

Khazov turned to the Great Bear.

"Let's have a course, navigator."

Khazov stood facing the North Star, and Artiushin put his back against Khazov's and faced the other way. Among the multitude of stars before his eyes he chose one of the brightest, standing about twenty degrees to the left. He pointed it out to Khazov.

"Remember it, Boatswain. That's the one we'll keep on. Well, let's start, eh? Oh, brothers, if you only knew how I hate to go in. It's cold, drat it."

They stripped quickly. The chill night air embraced their

overheated bodies. Pouring out half the oil, Artiushin smeared it over his body; Khazov did the same. The oil made them feel even colder. But they still had to tie their clothes into bundles after filling the trouser pockets with pebbles. For the last time Artiushin consulted his wrist watch, then with a desperate gesture flung the torch far out to sea; his watch he kept on, hoping against hope.

They gathered up their bundles and walked into the sea. At first the water felt warmer than the air. The bottom shelved steeply. When they were in up to their waists they hurled their clothes ahead of them. The heavy bundles sank at once.

The slight swell lifted the men's feet off the sandy bottom and they started to swim.

Artiushin had no difficulty in finding his star and headed straight for it. Khazov came up on his left and swam beside him. And just as before, while rowing in the boat, they found without any prior consultation a rhythm that suited each of them best, so here, too, after swimming for a minute or two rather irregularly—one falling back a little, the other getting ahead—they were soon swimming side by side with broad free movements.

Whether it was due to Artiushin's oil or to a reserve of body heat, at first they scarcely felt the water. They used breast stroke as the most economical and suitable style for long-distance swimming, and they reserved their strength by swimming steadily, not too fast. The swell hindered them a little. It lifted them up and then they found it hard to make headway. But when it gently brought them down their arms clove the water more easily. After a time, though, they adjusted themselves to it and spared their forces when they felt their bodies rise with the swell.

The monotony of their movements had a lulling effect on the mind. O-n-e, two-three—pause ... o-n-e, two-three pause. One hundred, two hundred, a thousand times. ... Was there room for anything else in the mind except that insistent rhythm? Yet Khazov was thinking. His thoughts dwelt on a subject always in his mind, the subject that was the cause of his habitual expression of concentration or, sometimes, of absent-mindedness that drew the attention of everyone who happened to look at him. This constant, pressing thought he shared with nobody. He kept it to himself because no one in the whole world could have helped him with friendly or loving words of consolation. His memories had become as much a part of him as breathing or the beating of his heart—and just as necessary to his life. He fully understood the futility of his thoughts and the powerlessness of memory to restore the past. Yet he dreaded that a time would come when those thoughts would quit him and his memories fade and vanish. Then Pyotr would be really dead, would really have gone out of his life.

There are people for whom sorrow is like a hurricane. It destroys everything around, it is capable of killing the grieving man himself, it turns a youth into an old man. But, like a hurricane, it passes and the sun shines again in the sky and only an echo of the grief that had been borne with such agony reverberates somewhere far away, a low rumble of a storm that has passed. And the air around is full of a new freshness and the grass, which the hurricane had bent to the ground, rises an unusually bright green, and life is reborn, stronger, maybe, than ever.

But there are people for whom grief is like a long, cold, dragging autumn of dreary days and sleepless nights. When this kind of grief becomes a permanent lodger in the heart, something to which one grows accustomed as to a chronic illness, it loses its sharpness and can, perhaps, no longer be called grief. Such grief is often to be found in the hearts of mothers who cannot forget. Memories remain alive, bringing back a lost voice, a face gone for ever, a thousand details connected with the short life of a child that died. No mother speaks of such grief, she keeps it to herself, and an occasional pensive look or moments of absent-mindedness reveal to others that a precious image still lives in her heart.

The sorrow that dwelt constantly in Nikita Khazov's heart was of this nature.

When Reshetnikov had looked at the photograph of Pvotr Khazov he decided that the boy could not be Nikita's son: it would have made the boatswain only about eighteen when the boy was born. But that was exactly how it had been. Khazov had married at eighteen as the result of a sudden, madcap, overwhelming love affair. Natasha had been seventeen. They were only just out of school and both studying for their college entrance exams; he for the Frunze Naval College and she for a medical college. How it all happened he could neither understand nor remember now. It was springtime in Sevastopol, the season of lilac and almond blossom, when the bracing air makes youth pine for love, and they were young and open-hearted and accepting no compromises. Love possessed them entirely, swept them off their feet. And when they discovered that a child was on its way Nikita said they must get married. Natasha would go to college as arranged but he would take a job in the Admiralty workshops. For some reason they expected a girl, but a son was born to them. Natasha went to Moscow, losing a year's studies, and leaving her husband behind. Little Pyotr was placed in the charge of Khazov's mother. The year Khazov was called up Natasha died as the result of an accident.

The boy was five before Khazov got to know him properly. That was when as a regular seaman he used to come home almost every day. He would bring the little fellow on board the sloop, take him for walks in the port, and soon the flotilla grew accustomed to Pyotr spending whole days with them. And just as Khazov had known once that his own life was going to be bound up with the Navy so he knew that his son would without fail grow up to be a sea captain. All their thoughts and deeds were directed to that one aim. Pyotr was to go to Frunze College where, by his appearance in the world, he had prevented his father studying.

Pyotr was drowned in March 1942. He had stayed behind when Sevastopol was evacuated, attaching himself to the sailors of the Seventh Brigade of Marines. He did not fancy the idea of leaving with the "kids." Somehow fate spared him, though he was in a hot enough spot—at Chorgun—begging for reconnaissance work and actually going into action armed with a rifle. Then a senior officer caught sight of him and gave orders for him to be evacuated. Twice he ran away from a ship that was taking civilians and wounded. The third time he was put aboard a hospital ship. The ship was torpedoed off Cape Meganom.

Pyotr had been drowned in the same cold sea in which his father was now swimming. And the familiar heartache which found so little outward expression grew stronger with the feel of that cold water.

Perhaps Pyotr had swum like this, too, spreading his thin, boy's arms: o-n-e, two-three—pause ... o-n-e, two-three—pause. But Pyotr had swum without hope. The coast was too far to swim to, and it would have been futile, anyway, for the coast was in enemy hands.

What had the boy thought about, how had he felt in his ordeal? How did he drown? Had he collapsed and lost consciousness or had he given up the struggle against hopeless odds?

In a strange way, there were some things about Reshetnikov that reminded Khazov of his son. Everything was different: their ages, to begin with, their dispositions, and their paths through life—yet there was something in common between them. As if Pyotr had grown up and become a lieutenant and been made captain of a sloop. For a long time Khazov could not make out where the resemblance lay. It was only when Reshetnikov told him about the "whale-boat" and the lake, and his talk with Yershov in the steppe, and the thundercloud, that he realized what it was—a peculiar, vague, almost instinctive love of the sea and ships which seemed to be governing all their actions in life. He recalled how once when he arrived at Sevastopol

he found his son in the trenches at Chorgun. When he tried to persuade the boy to be evacuated to the Caucasus where he could go on studying, Pyotr had answered: "But who is going to defend the Navy? They won't let me serve in the ships. But at least I'm fighting here shoulder to shoulder with sailors. I'm a sailor myself!"

O-n-e, two-three—pause.... O-n-e, two-three—pause.... Of course, the boy would have grown up to be like Reshetnikov. He had the same stubbornness, that pride too, and that way of going straight for what he wanted.... Brave, too.

"Boatswain!" Artiushin said, at his side.

Khazov turned his head.

"What?"

"D'you know how they shout along a waggon train? Trouble in the last waggon, Grandad's died'...."

"I don't follow."

"I've got cramp, that's all. I can only use my arms. I'm tiring."

"Hang on to me."

"No. You swim on. It'll pass. I'll manage."

"Hold on, I said."

"Listen, Boatswain. If you dawdle here with me the ship'll leave. She won't wait for us."

"They won't budge until dawn."

"So you think. They'll give us up and be off."

"Don't be silly," Khazov said sternly. "That's not like our captain. Put your arm round my neck."

"The current will take us along. We've got to keep swimming."

Khazov swam up to Artiushin and forced the other's arm over his own shoulder.

"Well, wait then," Artiushin said submissively. "Let me try and rub my leg. Much use that oil is, damn it..."

He splashed about and rubbed his leg hard. Khazov trod water. The swell rocked them and they could feel the current dragging them. Suddenly Khazov saw a big pinkish-

yellow light that for a second lit up half the sky over the coast. Then across the water rolled the dull thud of the explosion.

"What the heck's that?" Artiushin asked.

"That's your mine. Means we'll have a clear passage into the cove tomorrow," Khazov replied calmly. "All right now?"

"Wait a minute. I won't be long."

Still hanging on to Khazov, Artiushin kicked two or three times and then freed himself.

"Everything's in order. Full speed ahead. Let's get on course."

He turned again in the direction of his star and soon they were swimming again with that comfortable even rhythm: o-n-e, two-three—pause... o-n-e, two-three—pause. And again the swell lifted them up and lowered them down as a little while before it had been lifting and lowering that big round-pated mine until on the *n*th time it carried it into shallow water and dropped it on a submerged rock. By its own heavy weight the mine set off its detonating appliance and exploded without doing the least harm to anybody.

How long they had been swimming neither of them could say. Without admitting it to each other they were beginning to feel desperate. Perhaps they had miscalculated and were already past the ship. But they went on stubbornly moving their arms and legs in that monotonous, almost hopeless rhythm: o-n-e, two-three—pause ... o-n-e, two-three—pause ... o-n-e, two-three—pause ... Their intolerable weariness was telling on their hearts, their lungs, their muscles.

And then Khazov said, quite casually: "I bet they're worrying more on the sloop than we are. That mine went off right in the cove. They must have thought it was us. We must make it, Stepan, otherwise they'll get it all wrong. They'll stop using that cove. And it's a good place."

It took him at least ten attempts to get all this out. Artiushin answered briefly:

"Ay, we will, too."

They swam for another three minutes. Suddenly Artiushin shouted as loud as he could:

"There it is, I can see the green light. Drown me right now if I don't! Look! There, a bit to the right."

Khazov jerked his shoulders out of the water and saw a point of green light. It was shining level with the water, a long, long way off, but there, shining!

They swam towards it. And now it seemed not at all far off. Each time they rose on the swell the green light sent them a message of hope and safety. With each stroke they drew nearer to it, to the sloop, to warmth, to life.

Now, when their great military duty was fulfilled, when their very appearance brought clarity to the confused picture of Baffling Cove, when that highly important mission, so vital to the military interests of the state, had been accomplished, they thought of what had not entered the mind of either of them: that they were safe, that they were not going to drown, that in this vast dark sea they were not going to be carried past that cockle-shell of a sloop anchored there.

Time ran a thousand times faster. They never knew how that green point of light grew to a dazzling brightness or how their hands touched those blessedly firm ship's plates they had been yearning for.

When it happened Artiushin could not restrain himself.

"Ahoy, there," he called feebly. "May I come alongside?" There was the scurry of many feet on the deck, then Reshetnikov's voice rang out anxiously:

"Are you both safe? Where is Khazov?"

"Here I am, Comrade Lieutenant."

Strong arms pulled them on board.

A minute later a marvellous warmth enveloped their chilled bodies. There was a sharp smell of alcohol. Evidently, they were being massaged. Khazov clutched at a hand that was scratching him painfully on the chest.

"Everything's in order at the cove, Comrade Lieutenant. The current ... couldn't row back. Must get back to base.

Bring another boat. Meet them tomorrow. There was a mine.... Exploded.... Way's clear."

"I understand, Nikita Petrovich, I'll do it."

But Khazov was beyond hearing him. He had sunk into a soft, dry, warm pit. "O-n-e, two-three—pause.... O-n-e, two-three—pause...."

Reshetnikov went on to the deck from the engine-room where the two men had been taken. He filled his lungs with fresh air and called loudly:

"Send the wireless operator to me. Switch out the green light."

